STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

In Memory of Those Who Died on the Streets



A banner at the memorial declares: "Housing Is A Human Right." Lydia Gans photos



Young and old, Oakland residents gather at the memorial service for the homeless.



Seniors from St. Mary's Center honor the lives of those who died on the streets.

A memorial service in Oakland calls on elected officials to honor the memories of homeless people who died on the streets and to create housing for those still living.

by Kevin McFarren

Cold and wet. Words that most homeless people dread. In the pre-dawn hours of Tuesday, December 10, I feared that the miserable weather would put a damper on a very important event. Scheduled for that day at noon outside the Alameda County Administrative Building was the second annual Alameda County Interfaith Memorial Service for Homeless People.

I had planned to attend, both as a survivor who had lost friends to the streets, and to write about the event. As I looked at the slate-grey skies and steady downpour, I did what any street survivor and erstwhile journalist would do: I prudently crawled back into my warm and safe bed.

Hours later, the sun was up and the sky was blue. It was a perfect setting to venerate the homeless we had lost in the past year. The ceremony itself was very well-organized. Besides the Memorial Service in the courtyard fronting the Alameda County building on December 10, there would be a noontime vigil at Frank Ogawa Plaza facing Oakland City Hall each of the following three days.

The Memorial Service itself was special. Several local nonprofit organizations were primary forces in bringing this sad but important event to fruition. St. Mary's Center, the Women's Economic Agenda Project, Operation Dignity and the University of Creation Spirituality were instrumental in organizing the events. It truly was an interfaith effort. The co-sponsors make up a list far too long to print; and for journalistic integrity, it should be noted one of the co-sponsors of the Memorial Service was *Street Spirit*.

The service was carefully organized to include representatives from various faiths. Judaic tradition was represented by Temple Beth Abraham, Christian tradition by St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Buddhist tradition by Pace e Bene Nonviolence Center, Islamic tradition by United Muslims of America, and Native American tradition by the Native American Health Center.

I was also happy to see Supervisor Keith Carson take time from his busy schedule to be there; all other elected officials were conspicuous by their absence.

There were some exceptionally moving moments. Judy Jackson spoke emotionally about the struggle to live within the shelter system (in her case, St. Mary's Center) and still fulfill family responsibilities. Ethel Long-Scott, from the Women's Economic Agenda Program (WEAP), made an impassioned plea for more help for the homeless. She referred to a "right" to be housed. It was a stirring talk; but sadly, I can't find a court in the nation that recognizes housing as a human right.

The *San Jose Mercury News*, in an excellent article by Yomi S. Wronge, estimated the crowd as "about 70 people." At the peak, I counted about 120. Oddly, for a large event outside a public building, there was no visible police presence. I mentioned this as I casually bumped into an Alameda County Deputy Sheriff a few blocks away. He said their people were there, inside the building, with an extra deputy on duty. He said something touching. "Why make a show of force at a memorial?"

It was a meaningful memorial, and in the days that followed, there were vigils outside Oakland City Hall. All of these were to commemorate the homeless who had died in the past year in the East Bay.

As I researched this article, and heard conflicting numbers, I realized there is no way to count "homeless" deaths. One number tossed about for Alameda County was 104, coincidentally about the same number of homicides in Oakland this past year. Another number mentioned was 94.

Sergeant Mike Harper, who works for the County of Alameda in the Coroner's Office, suggested to me there is probably no reliable way his office could track the annual number of "homeless" deaths in the county each year. For one, only about one-third of all deaths are investigated by the Coroner's Office. If, for example, a homeless person with pneumonia or acute malnutrition winds up at Highland Hospital and dies, more likely than not, the loss of that person would not be recorded as having been caused by homelessness.

Apparently, there is not even a box on an official Death Certificate for deaths related to homelessness. In Britain, there is an official cause of death called "Death by Misadventure." It may sound Dickensian, but it probably applies to some people I have lost.

Mike Adamick, a writer for the *Oakland Tribune*, interviewed Alex McElree from Operation Dignity, and reported, "He [McElree] wanted to see a new homeless-related classification for deaths so people could easily track the plight of those who live on the streets."

Last year, State Senator John Burton authored SB 1751, which would mandate homeless death counts in each county in California. The bill passed both the Senate and the Assembly. Sadly, Governor Gray Davis vetoed SB 1751.

See **In Memory of Those Who Died** *page 18*

Poets of the Spirit

This issue celebrates the inspiring poets of *Street Spirit* who have created lyrical art and deeply felt reflections on what it means to be homeless in America. Their spirit-filled poetry and impassioned calls for justice are featured in this issue on pages 2-20.

A Celebration of the Poets of Street Spirit

Mary Rudge

Outside where the ground is protected by frost
they shelter themselves, the ones who've lost.
The ones we've lost, but still our own,
our children, our sisters, our brother's child.



Two of the thousands of women homeless and living on the streets in the Bay Area. Lydia Gans photo

Anyone You've Lost

by Mary Rudge

There are shanties down by the railroad track
and some are tarpaper, some are tin,
some are board with the walls so thin
newspapers cover the inside walls
to keep out the wind.

And the homeless build in the park,
some with cardboard and some with tarp
tents or lean-tos of plastic scrap.
There are people blanket-wrapped,
by day it's a coat by night it's a bed —
move on from this doorway the policeman said.

And a family can live in a rundown truck
that doesn't move much, just enough
to keep on the move
every seventy-two hours, it's the city law,
are they clean, do they cook, how do they eat?

Living on the street,
under the bushes close up to the church
outside where the ground is protected by frost
they shelter themselves, the ones who've lost.
The ones we've lost, but still our own,
our children, our sisters, our brother's child.
Is anyone you've loved and known
without a home? Is anyone without a home
someone you can love?

TO THE MISSING

by Mary Rudge

I desperately look for your face
among the homeless
and hungry.
I cannot find you.
I will feed this one,
I will take this one home,
in your name.

When I said I was searching for you
they asked: which ward do you
want to see?
What Multiple Sclerosis looks like?
What it looks like to be dying?
Have you seen AIDS? Schizophrenia?
Hunger?

One
turns like a flower toward the sun
toward love
like you, delicate around the mouth
with violet shadows,
everywhere I look.

Do people slip through the slats in
picket fences, the slats in hospital
beds? Become lost in trees?
Has anyone fallen past the Pacific Rim?

Is any poem I hold
strong enough for a lifeline?

One Nation Under God

by Mary Rudge

With broken eyeglasses and broken veins
she stands on the corner showing things
have a kaleidoscopic other view.

When she asks spare change
but you pass by
her only response is "God bless you"
and a broken-toothed smile.
She shows you how hearts really break,
can you feel your own?
She lets you see a whole country with
a government full of broken promises.

BLESSING (Remember the Women)

by Mary Rudge

May everyplace you look
stones become bread
may mangos and papayas
and pineapples
fall into your hands
may you feed the hungry
and give them flowers.
May swallows fly in the winds
of your passing
may monkeys dance
in the path before you
may children of all people
be your children
and all people be your family
may singing of small birds
in air surround you
may poems always be
in your mailbox
coming in to praise you
going out to right wrongs.
Remember you have the blessing
of all women before you
combing their hair by the lake
naming all beautiful things after
themselves

remember the women
who learned to walk on fire
lit your way
remember
the women who breathed fire
have blazed your path
remember
the women whose fire burned
pentecostal from forehead and brain
transformed your vision
remember your ancestress
the temple dancer
remember your ancestress
the Queen of the Euphrates
remember your ancestresses
Esther and Ruth
the mother who bore you
the woman you might have been
in another life
remember the women in chains and
whipscars,
with barbed wire wounds.
You are the one
whose sisters were buried alive
you are the one
whose sister drowned when
the river rose

whose sister died of famine
and drought
you are the one
who worked in the fields of California
and slept by the roadsides
harassed in the marketplace
in a far country sent to Siberia
for speaking out,
locked up as insane
against your will
you are the woman imprisoned
in burnoose
with clitoris cut in ritual
whose husband was chosen for you
you are the woman burned
for your dowry
you are the woman whose feet
were broken and bound
who could not walk.
You are the woman who
leaped over walls
who leaped into hearts
whose heart leaped forward.
May others embrace and join you.
May everywhere
you walk stones
become bread.

STAR SPANGLED CORNERS

(for the woman with the harmonica, the man with the saxophone, the boy with the guitar, the family with violin and tambourines.)

by Mary Rudge

What a city long lacked, now is on every corner!
Music, shimmering over us all,
every note shines in our ears,
we wear our day necklaced in sound.
For coin we spare, we get so rich.
The poor have jeweled us with song.
Are we entertained by the starving poor?
There should be artist's subsidy
for all who make those silver notes,
those emerald tones, gold mined from the depths of soul…
HERE'S MONEY! HERE'S MONEY —
not worth half of what you give us! Your work
is worthy of support — fingers busy all day long,
you who play the saxophone, banjo, harmonica, guitar,
in patched shirt, torn jeans, bare feet in the cold,
blood and pain in every bleeding drop of ruby rhythm!
It took joblessness and homelessness and hunger
to fill our streets with music. Song for food, sing for
(you hope) your supper, play your music which is now
our city treasure, our pleasure.
Starvation keeps thrilling us.

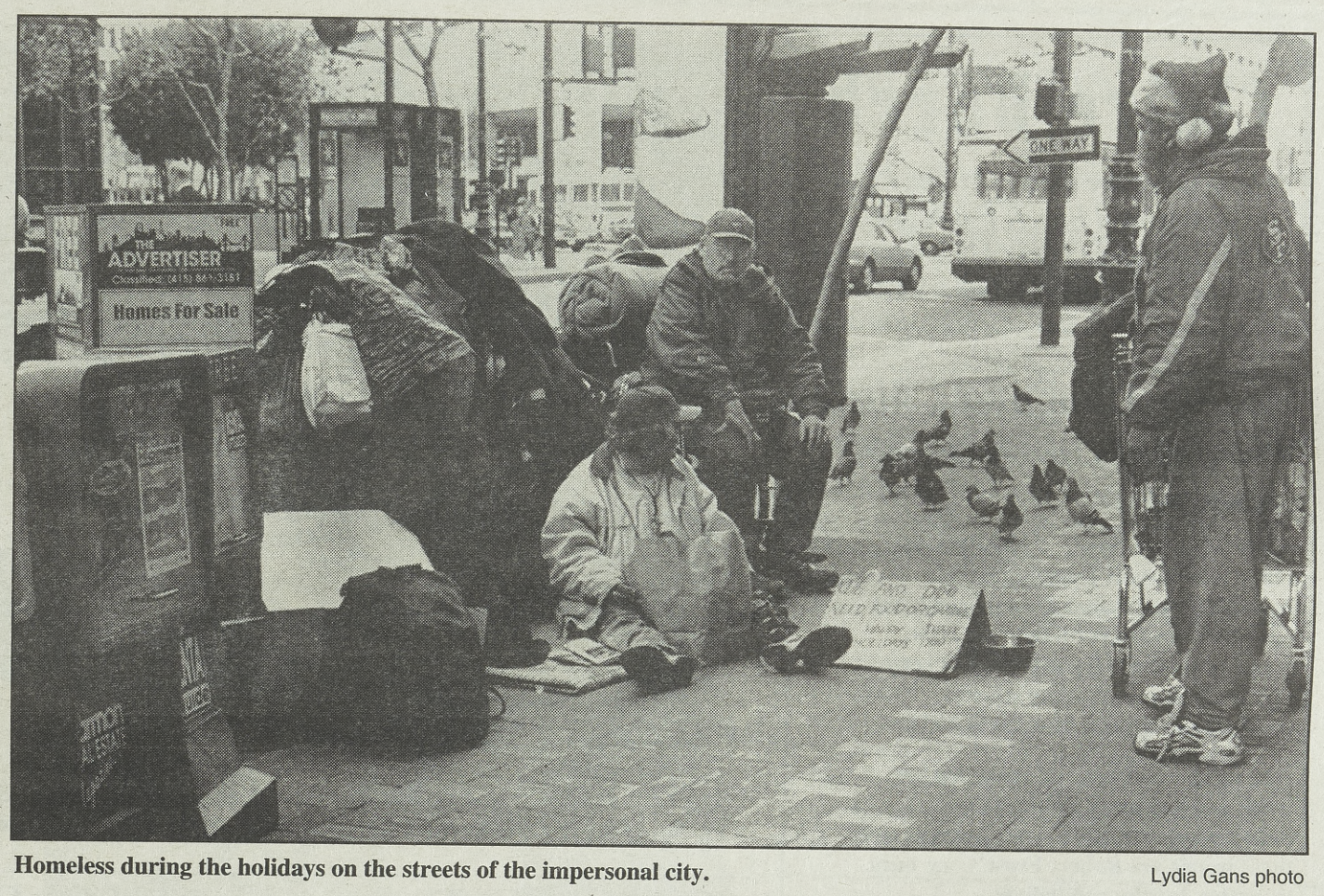
Letter to the Not Homeless

by Mary Rudge

A letter from the outer rim of rage
to the core of the inner being
of everyone
knowing the people
who live on the street out of mind
without home without healing
that we've learned to walk by
without seeing
that we don't care who is feeding
that no one is feeding, a letter to all
with home and mailbox.
A letter to all who have learned not to care
not to share anymore, there have been
so many so poor so long they are not in our
line of vision, though they stand before us
beseeching, saying God Bless You
for nothing. A letter is coming, has come
from fury, from anger, from despair.
And it says (what it said ten years ago,
and last year, and this morning): We
don't know where to go, what to do. Help!

Claire J. Baker

He's Whitman, staggering under juice happily shared by Dylan Thomas while Allen Ginsberg howls at another best mind gone down.



Homeless during the holidays on the streets of the impersonal city. Lydia Gans photo

THE FOOT

by Claire J. Baker

**If I hadn't slowed by the same bush,
I wouldn't have seen Christoph's foot
sticking out again, gotten up courage
to talk with him; drove his
wracked body to the Clinic:
under tired rags, a poetry professor
before the leg amputation
and too much pain-killer wine.**

**He's Whitman, staggering under juice
happily shared by Dylan Thomas
while Allen Ginsberg howls at another
best mind gone down.**

Street People, Please

by Claire J. Baker

**Abandon doorways, alleys and alcoves.
Here's a one-way ticket on a
psychedelic bus headed for
pauper's paradise;
there you won't be banned or pawned.
Or, lost ones, make your home
in the wilderness, live off the land
among comforting trees. But leave.**

**Deny that you heap your bodies under
cardboard, plastic, frost and rain
sleeping off life, the dagger thrust
of another dying we won't notice.**

**Deny that thieves steal your bottle,
your crutch. Deny the rapes, kicks,
roustings; deny sadists put out
cigarettes on your bare feet, that you
will struggle to the bus on your knees
dragging your soul in a burlap bag.**

**Deny it all.
Spare us our guilt.**

At Live Oak Park
Berkeley, CA

by Claire J. Baker

**A homeless man, "sober 16 years,"
(he lived under the creek bridge)
helped me jump-start my car's
dead battery. In return
I gave Mister Gentle some
leads for places to stay for
more than a day. We had
literature & loneliness in common.
We admired the concept behind
Maugham's *Magnificent Obsession*:
do a good deed for someone,
ask them to pass it on until
there's a chain reaction fusion
of kindnesses....**

ALLEYWAYS

by Claire J. Baker

**We have rushed past the homeless
heaped like potato sacks
in shadowy corners of trashed
sidewalks; have secretly scorned
those steam-vent beds,
liquor-stenched rags,
tin cans/hats for coins —
their fall from grace.
Yet know, there but for who
go we.**

**One rainy night when two trudged
down an alley, we gazed after them
as in a movie scene, a stark
photograph or a dream.
We saw them tall as buildings,
their eyes like open windows.
And where they had walked
in rain's freshness, light
etched their footprints.**

After Too Long On the Streets

for Lisa

by Claire J. Baker

**We bring her building blocks,
a Teddy Bear to pet,
some creamy taffy. Lisa asks,
"Where is the ocean wet?"**

**We three walk an ocean beach.
She begs we take her home
and comb her hair. Lisa, look,
the ocean still has foam
and all the whales are safe —
the last a big white lie.
We hug her, stroke her head,
whisper, Lisa, try.**

**We visit every week,
one day we'll bring a daisy:
pull the petals off,
end on No… not crazy.**

Street Spirit Photo, San Francisco

by Claire J. Baker

**A Vietnam Vet,
now a body-bag case lying
head down on his final sidewalk —**

**a Vet gazed at by a policeman
who looks like he almost cares,
in a black-and-white kind of way.**

Manic Depression, No Home

by Claire J. Baker

I can imagine someone
**high as the stars,
walking toward the moon
and god's warm cabin
where the door is always open,
and rags turn to gold thread.**

**Walking, walking,
miscalculating sparkling darkness
for shelter —
like Virginia Woolf
into the ocean
of no return.**

Wear the Poem if It Fits

by Claire J. Baker

**To you, who say you are only
a grain of sand lost and lonely
on the city shore, I wish
the ocean's salted scent and roar.**

**When caught in caves where shadows
hide, I wish you push and pull
of tide, sun rolling in on a wave
washing your image bright and brave,**

**a gull's white wings
where courage clings.**

**I wish for you a cove
where you will give and receive love.**

Rally, All You Homeless With Any Strength Left

by Claire J. Baker

**March naked and barefoot
up to the White House gate.
Bring your hungry kids and dogs,
don't mince words,
don't hold back.**

**Expose "naked" truths,
"bare" facts of what you go
through daily. Fantasize that the
Pennsylvania Avenue affluent
will kiss your cold feet,
offer a nice green lawn on which
to sleep, your bodies covered
with leafy branches from the
Tree of Kindness.**

**Leave only when you receive a
blanket, warm boots, living wages,
safe shelter, a bag of apples
to share with homeless people
too weak to march.**

**In leaving, insist that a white wall
of surrender be engraved with names
of all the fallen homeless.**

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Street Spirit is published by the **American Friends Service Committee.** Homeless vendors receive 50 papers a day for free, while earning income and educating the community about social justice issues. American Friends Service Committee bears the entire printing costs of more than $3,000.00 each month to provide our vendors with a positive alternative to panhandling. Please **donate** or **subscribe** to *Street Spirit* ! Help us remain an independent voice for justice!

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Street Spirit

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Claire Burch

whose ashes are these? I think I know
a thousand Robert Frosts ago.
he wouldn't have blinked to see me here
and watch my heart fill up with snow.

For My Daughter Laurie

Who Died of a Heroin Overdose

by Claire Burch

whose ashes are these? I think I know
a thousand Robert Frosts ago.
he wouldn't have blinked to see me here
and watch my heart fill up with snow.
these thoughts are fey and hard to keep
you made us promises too steep
and fell from grace and cried and died.

who turned cold eye and spoke too low
when you had nowhere else to go
dulled your swift smile, your heart as well.
these woods are Robert Frost's, not ours.
in winter, by dim candlelight
I see your grand mal seizures still.

I'm going out to see my small wild child
still standing by her backpack. Didn't know why.
Cruzito's Code of Honor gone to sleep.
but I have promises so deep
I could not reach them or the light that failed.

Two psyches diverged in a Robin Hood
you could not calm them then and understood
that heroin might bring them both together.
(too strong, too pure, the rose began to wither.)
truths no autopsy ever said.
In real life good is good, and blood is blood.

whose life was this, my broken child
whose China white, in package sealed
between the crosses row on row
like Rupert Brooke three wars ago?

thin skin, run and win
Blessings, baby smile.
Don't take the A train
beware the white whale.
it fractures with its tail.
(ice sliver in my brain)

and if by chance we did our little dance
the water sure is wide
is what the Bible said.
the movie Code of Honor
we saw it once together
we saw Cruzito die

oh heroin ! oh heroin the airplane can't fly.
the worm is in the rose
I know not how or why.

open city have pity. water wings.
Golden Gate bridge today
fall awake sweet joy to your once cry voice
on the bus to far away.

Named now, seven faced, river beyond sea,
ill starred, apart, signed, unbind, unmarried
screamed, immortal, unchanged,
pass in grace, up some Holy Girder.
Forgiven, forgiven Baybv almay malhuso
(I know only three lines of Kaddish
but will say them for the rest of my life).

whose labels are these? I think I know
my child is in Jung's river though
in dreams I run to meet her there
sweet end to life's last picture show.
When we saw Code of Honor
it portended
some agony still open ended.
you were Cruzito I was Mama
in the dark of a movie theater our fate was sealed
in this short vale of hand held docudrama.
In the movie Cruzito overdosed
and so, as you half planned it, you did too.
whose dead are these? I'll look and see
you will not hear me crying though.
like Frost my heart fills up with snow
that turns to ice as is its way.



A woman with her teddy bear gets through another day on the streets of San Francisco. Lydia Gans photo

COLD GROUND

by Claire Burch

cold ground was my bed last night,
sang a Wailer, stone was my pillow
walking blues and talking blues
my feet are too big for your shoes.

not found was a bed last night
leads I did follow
just waiting for the trailways bus without no fare

Old hound was my friend last night
Buck he was mellow
just planning the escape to don't know where.

How to get on the bus without being busted
just planning the escape to don't know where.
blank mind blues
booze and pill blues
dude grabbed my wallet and ID
can't find him.

Unbound was my dream last night
chased — going nowhere
just waiting for the greyhound bus without no fare
planning the homeless escape from here to there.

Strange town, gut like lead last night
wind in the willow
sad sound was my sound last night
tune no one could follow.
homeless blues
life I didn't choose
when your heart
is still battered and bruised.

Susan is homeless too

by Claire Burch

Susan is homeless too
doesn't like shrinks, says they never helped her
wishes there was some nice social worker
who would help her find a place to stash her things
says the worst thing about being homeless is no place
to stash her stuff so it doesn't get stolen in the shelters
says if she could just get enough money to buy fabric
she can sew these $300 custom dresses she could sell
doctors call it a thought disorder

She would like to go hiking in the mountains again
but doesn't have the fare
is pretty and has an old man but he's unreliable
doesn't think she'll try it with him again

Meantime it rains for three days
bottles are passed in doorways
the homeless crouch under canopies
frightened eyes, stubble of beards,
here and there women, some with children, going down
to Support Services to find a place for the night
Once in February, five of the women had pneumonia
Herrick kept them each a few days,
sent them back to the shelter
the ones who didn't have Medi-Cal couldn't fill
their prescriptions

Look Out, Sleeping America!

by Claire Burch

Callie says shelters no answer
they be better than the cold ground
but sometimes people get pushed around
and slip through the cracks (as the newspapers say)

Callie don't sit on her fanny at all
She be out doing actions with the brothers and sisters
and white people and chicanos and foreign refugees

Son of Everybody is homeless these days, Callie says,
brushing strands of hair back from her forehead

Jesus come by, man he'd feel right at home in the crowd

Homeless blues, Life we didn't choose
You offer your heart and it gets refused
Look out, Sleeping America!

Couple of decades ago, Buffy St. Marie wrote
My country 'tis, thy people are dying
Look out, sleeping America!

When You've Been to the Mountain

by Claire Burch

when you've been to the mountain
and it didn't come to you
and you couldn't move it and you couldn't save it
then bring yourself honey to the high hope of heaven
and find that mountain inside of your heart

man on the moon there's a man on the moon
but there's people sleeping on park benches right here
man on the moon there's a man on the moon
but there's people sleeping under bridges right here

we better do better than man on the moon right here

man on the moon we got a man on the moon
but there's people living in broken-down buses here
people living where the dark day passes right here

find forever in an over under
find forever in a silver sign

Formerly Banished to Asylums

by Claire Burch

In the 1950s they deinstitutionalized the "mentally ill"
oh boy, progressive, saying that from now on
large removed mental hospitals would be replaced by
cozy friendly community mental health centers

Ha ha ha! Cut budgets! Lotsa luck!

Joanne is sarcastic to ER room personnel
having come in voluntary more than her share
only to be put in restraints and taken away on a 5150
which means 72 hours in a locked ward
trying to keep it together so no 14-day hold
would be laid on top

Don't fire until you see, eyes on the prize, installment 8
look Ma a new minority
formerly banished to asylums, placed
in water too cold or too hot, given pills (a lot)
Now just mocked, abused and ridiculed

Julia Vinograd

Pretty soon their names will draw blanks
They'll be part of the great long ago
that never happened and they'll be
remembered as splendid dancing gypsies

For The Street People Who Died Over The Last Year

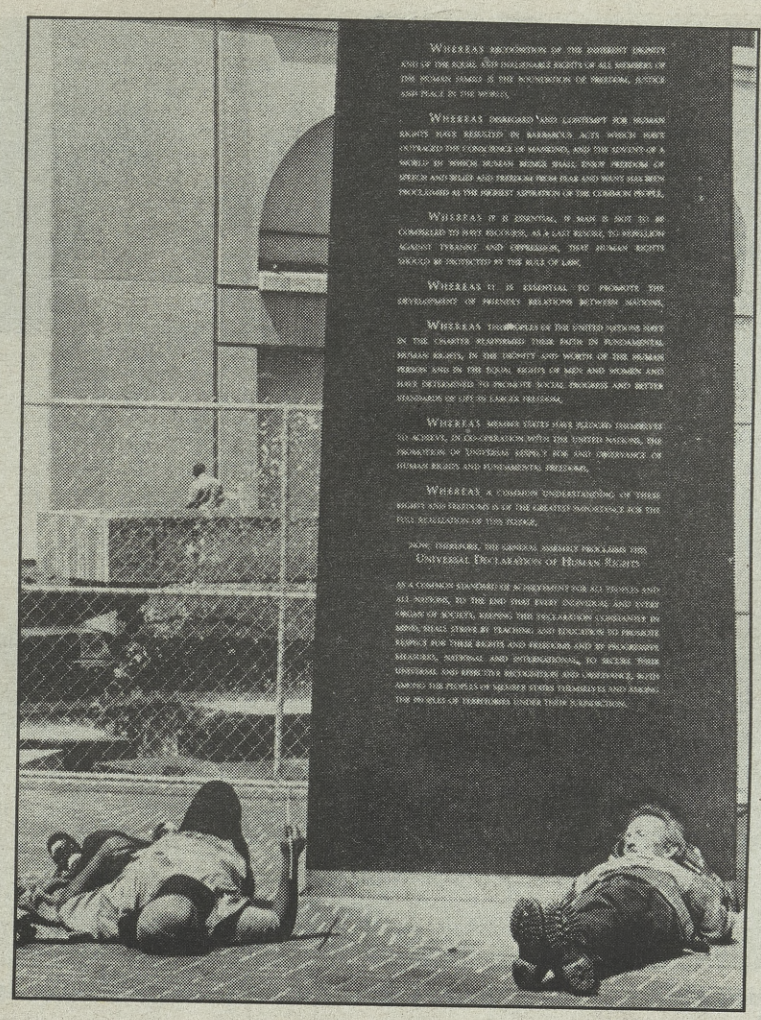
by Julia Vinograd

I don't miss them because I liked them;
it's a lot less innocent and more basic,
about half I disliked liking
and the other half I liked disliking,
but I was used to them.
They were part of the scenery,
I miss them like closed stores
thrown-out trash and falling stars.
When you count lampposts walking
down the street and one day
there's this hole in the pavement
and the wrecking crew's just left and
the number's incomplete
you notice.
And the same with one of the drunks
who held up the lamppost.
Nobody I knew very well; it's not such
a hot idea to have known them very well.
They're dead. Maybe it's contagious.
Slit your eyes and deny everything.
But the quarters they would've bummed
are lonely
and the beer itself is weeping in its beer
and about to be 86'd.
Pretty soon their names will draw blanks.
They'll be part of the great long ago
that never happened and they'll be
remembered as splendid dancing gypsies
like the rest of the legend.
And then they'll be gone.
And the city will plant new lampposts
and new people will comfort the cement
but for right now it's not the same,
no, it's just not the same.

Blues for All of Us

by Julia Vinograd

I sing the what went wrong song,
the hurting certain blurting blues
for everyone I meet,
strangers on the street
don't talk to strangers.
Rage in cages worn like clean clothes,
no way out. I sing, I shout
every name in the phone book,
don't look away.
Faceless crowds have faces,
everyone has a story and a song
of what went wrong.
We live in lonely with the rent due,
you don't know me. I don't know you.
Shadow armies do target practice with
our smiles behind miles of barbed wire.
The moon's a flat tire,
can't drive to safe and warm.
Blues for everything left unsaid
hangs over the bed like colored balloons
shrinking as the air goes out
as we shrink away.
Lost chance blues. Hurt by a glance,
pretend not to see. You don't know me.
We were all notes in a song that's
gone away, leaving only the blues.
I don't know you. I don't know that
song where everyone dances,
a string of paper dolls
warming the sun. Safe and warm.
All I can do is connect the blues like
dots, tear smudges drawing us close.
Don't turn away,
I know it aches and burns.
I sing initials in tree trunks
that broke their carved hearts
and put out flowers
and every flower is a face.
I sing the blues for all of us,
it's all I have,
all we have left of that first song.



Lydia Gans photo

Homeless people sleep in United Nations Plaza, San Francisco, at the base of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that all people have the rights to food, clothing, housing, medical care, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability and old age.

Man With A Shopping Cart

by Julia Vinograd

I remember cloud castles in the air,
top-heavy wishes that couldn't fall down
just blow away.
This evening I saw a man go by talking to himself
pushing cloud castles in his shopping cart.
His wishes.
A pile as magnificently broken as the Watts Towers
and not a single thing of use.
The wind had blown him away, apart,
clutching at clouds.
His shopping cart full;
his shopping cart empty.
I remember watching the cloud shapes
and giving them haphazard names.
Doesn't that cloud look like a giraffe
with the neck blowing longer?
Doesn't that one next to it look like a giant turtle?
And doesn't that cloud on the edge of the sky
bent over and pushing the horizon,
doesn't that one look something like a man?

STREET TIME

by Julia Vinograd

Street teenagers thrown out of time
like getting caught using expired transfers on a bus.
Their dyed hair and soft kisses lost to the rearview mirror.
The future left without them.
Street teenagers play at vampire children
who never grow up,
Peter Pan with fangs, shared cigarettes
and skateboards flying nowhere.
Death is their summer vacation
but what they did on their summer vacation
they won't tell the class.
The chalky blackboard looming in another world.
The teacher whose false teeth grind like pebbles.
By now, none of it happened.
No future, no past.
When the rain hurts them, smears their egyptian eyepaint
and makes them run for shelter
as if they were human,
street teenagers get skull and spider tattoos
which hurt much more
and let everyone admire how brave they are.
How beautiful, the ugliest monster
outshone by their glowing skin.
How young, which teenagers despise
with lies and fake i.d.s.
No future, no past, no present.
But look at them. How young.

SHADOWMAN

by Julia Vinograd

When the train whistle blows
and it goes to the bone
about half an hour later there's this man
walking into town, walking real slow.
And he didn't come by train
and he didn't ride the rails
and he doesn't breathe
until that whistle blows,
no, he doesn't breathe
until that whistle blows.

He's a man for love and he's a man for drink
and he always knows just what to say
and he casts a shadow
till that train whistle blows
then he fades into smoke and he blows away.

He casts himself off like rattlesnake skin,
tumbleweed shoes and dust on his tongue;
he walks out of his life like a noose loose hung.
He's a shadowman and as shadows can
he's back where it all begins:
train whistle goes to the bone,
alone, all alone.

In America

by Julia Vinograd

Wherever you are
you have to be on your way
somewhere else
where crowds of admirers await you eagerly.
and important matters require your attention
somewhere else,
anywhere else,
not here.
If you're not on your way
you're in the way:
(an obstacle, a sarcastic doorway shadow,
a presumed disappearance, an erased face,
a human smudge sinking thru the sidewalk).
So everyone, all over America, hurries.
Even making love
you'll only be safe
when it's over and part of you
instead of you being part of it.
You walk under an expected sun,
an anticipated moon,
complaining impatiently
because the janitor hasn't removed the outdated ones,
because today's light is as bad
as last year's christmas ornaments.
Not these streets.
Not this city.
Not this lover.
Not this poem.
Not here.
Not now.
Not ever.
And there just isn't
time to explain.

"Cleaning" The Streets

by Julia Vinograd

I remember the signs around public buildings:
library, hospital. "Do not pick the flowers."
"Do not walk on the grass." And in museums:
"Stay behind the gold rope.
Look but don't touch." And it made sense.
A child could knock over a 10,000-year-old vase.
And the hospital flowers were paid for
out of the hospital public relations fund
which also paid the gardener.
But now... There is a campaign
to get poor people off the street
as if shoes with holes wear holes in the pavement.
And graffitti springs up like poison ivy
if a shadow falls on walls
without a 500 dollar suit.
And only people who own a car
should be allowed to walk on the streets
or the streets will turn to sand
and the city will sink into the sea.
Maybe we should put the streets in a museum
and make the tourists
stay behind the gold rope.

Michael Creedon

How do you do it, my glowing
Heroes and heroines, out here braving
The elements and the ups and downs of
Human interaction, making a statement
That is way beyond fashion?

Better Than I Do

by Michael Creedon

There you are again
Lying curled up without a blanket
On the pavement in a rainy doorway
On Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley
As I pass you on my way to the hospital
Program I'm in for being bipolar,
And you are covered only
By a light jacket and the cold drizzle
That falls lightly on you as your face
Is frozen in sleep. I wonder
How you can survive even a single hour
There, let alone the whole night.
I guess God has a funny way
Of taking care of you.

There you are again
Sitting cross-legged on the pavement
Of the sidewalk with your back against
The front walk of Mel's, panhandling
With a wax paper cup in front of you,
Giving the passers-by like me
A friendly sparkling smile, with that
Long John Silver black patch
Over your left eye, a half-smoked
Cigarette hanging from the corner
Of your mouth, yellow smoke curling
Up into your face as you breathe.

There you are again
With your 18-year-old girl's navel
Pierced with a gold ring, not to mention
One nostril, and your bleached blonde
Punked-out spiky hairdo, young
And pretty and feisty-looking as you
Ask me for a cigarette as you do
Every day, barefoot in the wind,
Faded holy jeans and a denim jacket
Covering the upper part of your chest
Leaving the flat smooth belly exposed.

How do you do it, my glowing
Heroes and heroines, out here braving
The elements and the ups and downs of
Human interaction, making a statement
That is way beyond fashion?
A statement deep inside the twists of
Human nature which you make no claim
To understand, but leave me the feeling
That you somehow understand me
Better than I do.



"THE HOMELESS" **Art by Kaethe Kollwitz** Charcoal and wash 1909

Make It Out Alive

by Michael Creedon

I'm on my last legs,
and I'm crying too.
The song on the cyclone jukebox is
"Hey Jude."
I'm going to an AA meeting
but my bones say no.
How do I think I'll make it anyway?
My thoughts are all down
with moments from the past.
The future, unformed like
a stormy sky,
seems to offer more death.
How am I supposed to
get out of here?

I buck up my chin
and take a deep breath.
I lift up my feet;
I've had my dark rest.
The sun is soon scheduled
to reappear.
I know I can make it if
I don't give in to fear.
I've got 43 cents in my pocket
so I know I'll survive.
I think I can make it
out of here
alive.

A New World

by Michael Creedon

I keep insisting on a new world
But I'm having a hard time
Giving up the old one.
Can we keep this part?
Can we keep that part?
Because I don't know.
How much can I hang on to?

I keep insisting on a new world
But I face the mornings with
A feeling of horror, and I can't
Believe I'll make it up to what
I have to be.

Every day
I break the law.

I keep insisting on a new world that
Offers sanctuary to recalcitrants
Like me, who don't know when
They've had enough of the old
To want the new.
And I've done it all over again
A thousand times.

I keep insisting on a new world with
Peace, and freedom, and equality;
I can't see anything wrong with it,
But I always have to push everything
And in the end the new world
Keeps becoming the old world
But worse
And more deceptive.

Kaethe Kollwitz

Kaethe Kollwitz dedicated her life to creating political art in solidarity with the downtrodden and oppressed. Renowned pacifist Romain Rolland wrote of her compassionate art: ***"The work of Kaethe Kollwitz which reflects the ordeal and the pain of the humble and simple, is the grandest German poem of the age. This woman of virile heart has looked on them, has taken them into her motherly arms, with a solemn and tender compassion. She is the voice of the silence of the sacrificed."***

See *Kaethe Kollwitz Drawings,* published by Thomas Yoseloff, 1959, and *Kaethe Kollwitz,* published by George Braziller, New York, 1951.

Who But A Master?

by Michael Creedon

There, stars bloom brilliant,
Rolling through heavens
a la Van Gogh,
And I'm standing here under
A tattered umbrella I found blown
Inside out in a Recycle Only can.
I follow instructions.

Deepest black frames stars & rains,
A noble occlusion of
Heaven, and me, here, 3:00 a.m. on
A Thursday night, busses stopped
Running and traffic 2/3 dead.
I'm wondering where I could rest a
Dry hour. Earlier,
(Pre-Umbrella Time), snoozed a bit
Soaking and lashed from
Rain, on a crumbling bus bench.
If only family transport ran
All night, and I had a bus pass.
That's what they're for, right? and
Riding through the infinite hours of
Pre-dawn to beat the rain.
And in the summer beat the heat.
Sometimes BART or a bus is
Air-conditioned. Tonight, if they ran,
They'd have the heat on, and I'd get
Dry. If the heat were on, I would
Succumb to it in peace & harmony.

I'm pretty good at suffering,
But I haven't lost my ability
To succumb to warmth.
Who but a master
Could have painted that sky?

People On The Street

by Michael Creedon

"People on the street
Need a place to go." — Neil Young

Where do you go when
The shadows of the concrete canyons
Disappear? There's always
The cemeteries — I've done that —
Hide out among the tombstones.
Pay the neglected dead
A visit. But what about you,
The neglected living — who
Visits you? And where do you go
When the outer shadows disappear
And the inner shadows reappear?

You can dance with each other
In the shadows of the fears —
There are so many fears you have.

Where do you go to dump or confront
Those fears? Where can you go to meet
Those fears without running away?
And what about the Big Mother Fear
The biggest of all, who spawns
The others? I don't know.
I need a place to go too
When the shadows and the light
And the bright city lights and
The sun and the moon and the stars
Disappear.
I'm a person on the street too.

People on the street
Need a place to go.

Follow The Money

by Michael Creedon

Follow the evidence, follow your instincts, or follow
The money, if you want to get to the heart of the matter.
There's usually not enough evidence; your instincts will
Generally get you in trouble, so you follow the money.
It's a method tried and true by cops, crooks, and politicians.
Follow the money to a ten million dollar corporate land scheme
Into the pockets of a swindler or conglomerate.
Follow the money into more illicit land and other schemes.
Follow the money into unlisted Cayman Island bank accounts.
Follow the money into yachts and furs and jewels
And Parisian lingerie and limos and cocaine and chauffeurs
And $1,000 a plate crooked politician endorsement dinners.
Follow it down the line into silken toilet paper,
Stop-The-Stench $500 colognes, and hired guns.
Follow it down the sluice to the sea,
But you'll never find the homeless that way
Because none of the money reaches them except a
Few quarters and dollars here and there and they are
Dying of exposure and malnutrition and they are still here,
Asking for spare change to eat bad food once a day,
Marked by the scars of The World's prejudices.
Follow the money
But don't miss the missing link.

Even The Angry Gods Get Mad

by Michael Creedon

Striding down & up the raw streets
Of San Francisco/Oakland/Berkeley,
Now hostile Aztec gods display
Inhuman warrior plumage of contempt,
Wearing their bird and animal masks,
At what these fleshmill cities have done
With so much human potential lying untouched
In the waste & carnage of possibilities
At what these monopolized-by-greed metropolises
Have chosen to expose their homeless & needy to.

Yes, even the angriest of gods get madder
To see such pillage & dismay
On the faces of those sucked into
The afterburners of these descending jets,
The civilizations once ruled in more peace
And less torment.
I pray for a return to power
Of the ancient angry gods,
To lay waste the behemoths
Fat on the bone-marrow & meat of those who
Ask not for power or revenge,
But merely to survive.

Eileen Corder

candles burn in the snow
in front of the Wall of Death
bouquets of flowers
are covered with snow



"UNEMPLOYMENT"

Art by Kaethe Kollwitz Charcoal and pencil 1909

deluge

by Eileen Corder

above our heads the sky darkens
into a dream
that always was America

on the corner, hanging by a thread
of ink
men and women
prop themselves
with cardboard signs

every corner, every street
they all lead to

Please

to the authorities

by Eileen Corder

please don't tell me where to sit
or that I can't sit
or lie down

I've given life
I know that it splits you in two
that children are born innocent
and suffering will never be
completely eliminated

don't tell me where to sit
conscience rises higher than your stick
that sort of thing no longer intimidates me

in the custody of night

by Eileen Corder

one floor underground
and I'm not the only woman here
who searches while she quietly eats
for a place in one of the other worlds

in the custody of night — who rests
in her custody and in her squinted up eyes
what child turns suddenly into a mirror
what window seat, what boat, what breeze

Songs of the Old World

for Dora and Tom

by Eileen Corder

A war orphan, a refugee
but mostly a kid, you traveled north
away from the graves of your parents
away from the songs of the Old World

Today, it's north again
a war orphan
an old woman on government dimes
but mostly you're still a kid
all four feet of you grinning and singing
"I gotta be me, I gotta be me..."

You double over and cry when they say
"Your son's had a bad week"
they lead you to his corner, his bed
and you hold his fretful head in your arms
in an hour you'll be folding his underwear
smiling at your babe and singing
"I gotta be me, I gotta be me..."

Later I pick up an old book of xeroxed poems
Tom Roberts (The Puppet Man)
smiles out from the cover
a war orphan; a refugee?
an old man on government dimes?
Or just a kid?

I look at the words on the little graves
of our past
"stop the killing"
"get drunk on people"
"I gotta hunger, I gotta need"
and strangest of all
"I gotta be me.. "

my soul to keep

by Eileen Corder

when will we get our reward
in heaven? in old age?

will it be a bed and a corner
one's own special place
to sit and read for hours
or nap, or play cards, or talk
with a friend

it's a simple thing, a bed
with a pillow, a belonging, a smell
that which breaks our fall, a mound
on which we rise into uncommonness
and into lonely sleep

no rules can pull it down
or should take it away

bed, be my home
be my reward for being born

One Rotten Apple

by Eileen Corder

But what spoils society
is not the rottenness
but the belief

The belief that the poor want to be poor
the down and out like
what they see in the mirror
that people who cannot cope
are not coping with
uncopeable circumstances

Make believe for once
that everyone wants a job
wants to belong
wants to be proud of their work
proud of themselves
and have a place no one else
on this whole planet can fill

hospital

by Eileen Corder

waiting
waiting
the beaten, the sick, the raving
where can they go
even the moon is full

and every bed taken
the patient, taken
by the bed
clasped and squeezed
in a jealous fit, as if

night will never end, as if
bed become animal
and devour its mate
while outside they wait
even the moon is full

HIDEOUS

After a Palm Sunday visit to the oven room in Auschwitz..

by Eileen Corder

there will never be another War, here
in this room

War survived

it went up the chimney
then jumped from the black smoke
like British paratroopers, not God
War
shut this factory of death

and War escaped

like radioactive fallout and acid rain
it falls to Earth
even when we try to wash it off with water
the water is contaminated by war

but here, from this day forward
War is forever banned
I know, I stood under the low ceiling
among the many seekers
each one a witness to the closeness
and darkness of the gas chamber
to the metal tracks in the floor of the crematoria
where corpses were wheeled efficiently
and without interruption

a teenage girl rocks back and forth, sobbing
a prayerbook in her hands, she faces the ovens
I try to make a fist
but War won't come in here

here, there is nothing
but unspeakable God
I open my eyes and see nothing
snowflakes fly in through a hole in the wall
then fall in a sort of unhurried way

Auschwitz

by Eileen Corder

a young adolescent leans against her mother
I stare at the little dresses and caps
visitors break down in the corridors

candles burn in the snow
in front of the Wall of Death
bouquets of flowers are covered with snow

there is no heat
we have been here for hours
I am glad I am cold

KL*

by Eileen Corder

Arbeit Macht Frei
Cyclon B Macht Frei,
Phenol injected into the heart

loss of identity, torture, confusion
the Final Solution
monotonous and merciless regularity

the camp clock
from one bowl of soup to the next
promises, suffocation

* KL stands for *Konzentrationslager:* concentration camp. *Arbeit Macht Frei,* or "Work Makes Free," was the infamous sign at the Auschwitz entrance. Cyclon B is a cyanide poison used in the gas chambers. Phenol was a poison injected into sick people in the Auschwitz infirmary to eliminate them.

Randy Fingland

come ye caravans of loaded shopping carts
brigades with grocery-bagged belongings
regiments of backpackers with bedrolls

a general call for all with no abode

by Randy Fingland

come ye caravans of loaded shopping carts
brigades with grocery-bagged belongings
regiments of backpackers with bedrolls
righteous bums, hobos and drifters
you thunderbird suckers passing gulps
to each other working the corners
to hustle hard for another stake
practicing the foot to foot jitterbug
to fight the cold off,
spirit a circulation through the limbs
assemble you park bench somnambulists by day
who by night snore anonymously from behind the dark

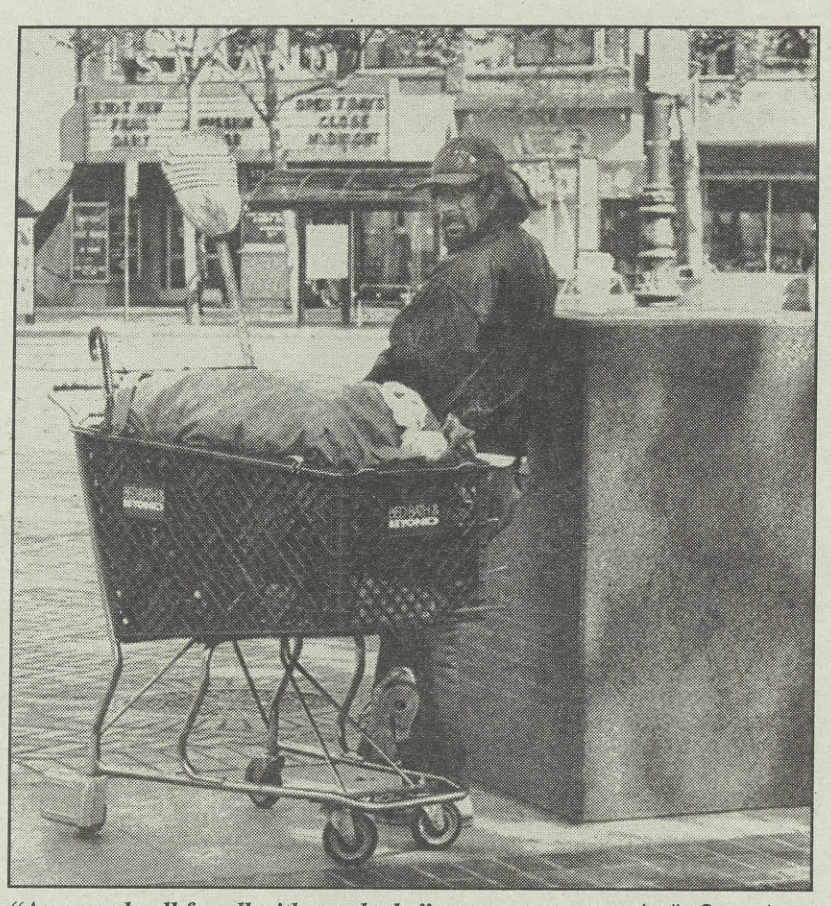
this growing class
unclassified
except by estimated number

no house in the mortgaged suburbs
no overfurnished futuristic apartment
crowded into midtown
no full-accessoried efficiency studio
with built-in security to protect the 360 degree view
no winestenched pukestained mattress in a room
with one blanket to staunch the early morning chills
in a never classy from-the-day-it-opened hotel
no cot in a church sponsored heated refuge
no out of service still operational school bus bunkhouse
no camper or pickup with an aluminum shell
or long-legged van with a foam pad
no backseat in an abandoned four-door sedan
no medical insurance
no registered claim to a place in line
no assigned position on a waiting list for help
no promise of a roof
new shoes for the winter
guaranteed training for a job
no money
not enough for a regular meal
solely with
occasional access to an outdoor public toilet

somehow elected to high places by popular vote
officials forget their human roots
lose sight of life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness
although able to remember to fund defense adequately
for continuing a self-serving economic boom
that excludes countless people turned out into the streets
outside thick doors held by ever stronger bolts and bars

these mouthpieces voice an unspoken pretense
that nothing is wrong
with the perception
that in the true land of plenty
a certain segment
of this highly advanced, civilized society
does not exist

pass the word:
converge on Washington
until there's a sufficient density
of the unaddressed
claiming 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
as a maildrop
so the politicians can't help but act fast
to draft a shelter-and-meal minimum aid package
before the rest of the world
learns the extent of hopelessness
the privileged foster in America



"A general call for all with no abode." Lydia Gans photo

asleep under bridges

by Randy Fingland

one of these days
one of the ways
change will happen:

the hand with
the empty palm
will not be extended

the powerful coffers
of influence
will empty

so all stomachs
even of babies
may be full

so all nights
may be spent
under a roof

when the meek
join into one voice
of mighty force

the 90% solution

by Randy Fingland

ever notice
complaints over money
always come from the 90%
without it
whereas those 10%
who actually have 90%
of the nation's wealth
complain about the
regulations keeping them
from getting more

antithetical wisdoms

by Randy Fingland

suffer the little children
it's the way it was for me

even though my intention
is to end that legacy
make human activity
a safer reality
for tomorrow's youth

join me
in affecting this change
so your and my kids
won't have to grow up
into this too enduring
fatalistic culture

let us start today
the dismantling

first accept my open hand
in partnership
because only together
can we overcome
the fears that normally
make enemies of strangers

upstream sources

by Randy Fingland

there's always safe shelter
in the same facility afforded
a body's sound sleep last night

oh once again it'll be said
a cure for these blues
is just around the corner

provision for the many comes
in sheets, blankets and cots
spread under a credible roof

so it'll be reclaimed a cure
for these blues is only beyond
that next field of dreams

temporary disadvantageousness
is easily fixed with an ounce
of care given casually as change

downstream that refrain means
any sure cure for these blues
requires patience until the day
after tomorrow

Hungry Children?

by Randy Fingland

questions like these
may have no multiple choice
or extended essay answers
easy solutions
proof in the abstract
requiring an ounce of faith
accountancy by statistic
precedented response
legislated or propositioned
but for questions like these
there may be no answers
unless they come straight
from the heart

the last tv dinner

by Randy Fingland

they say it gives a cleaner wash but it really doesn't
they say it's necessary for a better life but it's not
they say nicotine isn't addictive but it is
they say radioactivity is safe in trace amounts
but it never is
they say they can't afford to clean up toxic dumps
although causing these areas was easily affordable
they say they know what's best or worst
they say with one breath it might be healthier for us
and with another breath maybe not
they say more is always better but it's not,
like the universe everything needs to expand
but it doesn't
everything's better bigger, especially brand names
like the economy needs to grow, profits need to show,
but they don't
they say doctors recommend it
but when asked in their offices they won't
they say better not shout better not cry
they say there's plenty of old-growth forest left
but there's not
we know there's no over-the-counter medicine
that cures the common cold
although it's touted everyday
they say everybody needs one when not everybody does
they say we're at peace but continue to make weapons
in our own defense
they will say anything so everything they say
means nothing
they say it's better for us, or not
but it's not, or it is
and so we've learned to believe them
not

no sleeping

by Randy Fingland

for the second straight night
the police angle sharply towards the curb
in front of our apartment building
their cruisers fill the dark with
dizzily swirling light
they've come to handcuff the homeless man
who with our permission uses our Accord
as shelter, the trunk as his closet
it's around 1:30 AM
the station rings our number
to say they've apprehended someone breaking
into the trunk of our car
even though they know the suspect
and are aware that his presence is sanctioned
because this hassle-the-homeless-man
has happened several times before
including just last night
there's been a complaint they excuse themselves
as they run our licenses through the computer
to bring these homeless down another notch
that must be the order of the day
they have no home
nowhere to keep their clothes
not enough to eat on a regular basis
but instead of nutrition
it's make more prisons hire more guards
don't let the powerless get near self-respect
by maybe catching forty winks under a bridge
or in berkeley
by sleeping in the security of a car
in fact there is no sleeping soundly
if you're homeless
unless you're behind bars

catch as catch can

by Randy Fingland

the abandoned shopping cart
overflowed:

plastic bags stuffed
with aluminum & tin cans,

as well as
plastic & glass bottles,

hung on every side,
stood glazed

wet,
from so much rain.

goin' on wrong

by Randy Fingland

single family burnouts
bring duplicate
indifference
in triplicate disorder
while peripherally
quadrupling
the quintessence of
weather-beaten faces
on the streets of all need

Bob Blossom

We have to decide:
Is it criminal
To be without money?



A homeless person rests, carefully guarding all his worldly possessions stored in shopping carts. Lydia Gans photo

Against Ourselves?

by Bob Blossom

A society becomes criminal
As it addresses the issue of poverty
With repression
Rather than
Help where help is needed.

We have to decide:
Is it criminal
To be without money?

Or to allow others
To be without
Needed funds?

If the latter
We have some heavy thinking to do.

If the former
We've already decided

Against ourselves.

The Cry

by Bob Blossom

What have we done to deserve this?
Is the cry of the homeless
As their shacks are dismantled
And their belongings trashed.

Should we not cry with them?

exhaust-ed?

by Bob Blossom

How did needy become unneeded?
We don't know how to spell?
We can't speak human?

Since when did civilization
become a torture-chamber?
Is this a triumph of democracy?
Money's more important than people?

Life's a machine, right?
An automobile?
Get rid of the exhaust-
ed?

Do to others what you would
have them do to you
also means
Every action has an equal
and opposite reaction
or
What goes around comes around

Got it?

A little pity please.
It doesn't pay?
No money in it?
How rich the poor are
compared to you!
They're paying debts you haven't
begun to conceive

yet

Service

by Bob Blossom

Is money our real boss?

Or love
of life?

Shouldn't we serve
who we really are?

Our Motto?

by Bob Blossom

Grab what you can while the
grabbing's good!

Is this going to unite the world
or destroy it?

Humanity Doesn't Matter?

by Bob Blossom

Is it that
in our educational system
(and society)
There are those who major in selfishness
And those who flunk into helplessness?

Just asking

What are we learning
if we don't learn
we're human
and live on earth?

It's not an assumption
as we're assuming
but an achievement

Of soul

But that's an old-fashioned word isn't it?
considering how well we're doing
as bodies

Which *we*?

There are those who count their gains
And those who count their pains

Is that it?
Humanity doesn't matter
Is that the latest chatter
around our version of
no pain
no gain?

If we don't keep their suffering
out of sight
How are we going to pretend
everything's all right?

Out of sight pain
for others

Is that what we call gain?

Just asking

Just asking

Home

by Bob Blossom

We know how hard we've struggled
to make a home a home.
So those who haven't what it takes
let them be homeless! hey!

Is this our philosophy?
What makes us great?

A Melody

by Bob Blossom

life
is a melody
played by fingers
of love
into love

HUMANKIND?

by Bob Blossom

What is money for?
—To enable man.
—To do what?
—Live better.
—Is it doing that?

Why is man so dismissible a part
of his own equation?
In human mathematics
why doesn't he count
himself one?

—But he only just discovered
a few centuries ago
that he existed!
—As a unit?
Or a collection
of frightened fragments?

Now he's trying to prove himself
irrelevant
to and through his own means:
can means exist without ends?
—You're begging the question!
—As man's beggaring himself?

Why did we throw kindness
out the window?
To see if someone (a child perhaps)
might go out
and bring it back?

And teach us how to say
Humankind intelligently?

Grave Grace

by Bob Blossom

Grave grace
Of space
Move in us
Like the fingers
Of the early dawn
We are

The World A Stage

by Bob Blossom

all the world
a stage?
no a movie theater
where the projectionist
is the light
is the film
is the screen
is the audience
is the brotherhood
of the belief
we are

Christianity

by Bob Blossom

Christianity:
Give all you have to the poor
and follow me.

What we have:
Give all you have to the rich
and get lost.

What Do We Mean By We?

by Bob Blossom

How long
do we go on dreaming
we can bring peace on earth
by threatening each other
and ourselves
with extinction?
—It shows how powerful we are!
—Intellectually?

**

—What's the alternative?
—Affirming life on earth
and that democracy shall flourish.

**

—Some people wouldn't agree.
—The disease of self importance
within a narrow context
has a remedy.

**

—Assassination?
—No.
People power.

**

—What's *people power*?
—The will of the people
to upend the apple cart
that's fruitful
only to the few.
—So what should we do?
—Affirm life
on earth

**

For US.

**

And our children too.

**

—By *US* do you mean...?
—Humanity.

**

Isn't that our name?

George Wynn

and you who have never walked in their shoes know in your heart that permanent shelter from the night is as simple as one gold arch

Urban Planning

by George Wynn

on the other side of the world
not much more than a stone's
throw from the architectural gold
domed vision of our city planners
a homeless flea market languishes
where children squeeze through a
holed chain link fence trampling
shit-stained *Leaves of Grass*
paperback eluding shards of glass
yellow puddles of necessity's call

as the chill of darkness sets
Tenderloin gypsies pack calendars,
used appliances, second-hand garments
into shopping carts and the
caravan moves on weary knees
and blistered feet for
anywhere and everywhere for
a night of stars and skies

and you who have never
walked in their shoes know
in your heart that
permanent shelter from the night
is as simple as one gold arch



"Scavengers" Painting by Christine Hanlon, oil on Canvas. 32" by 40"

Lonesome Tracks

by George Wynn

she has a gold soul with
no party to go to
or De Maupassant necklace to wear
she has seen too much, she has suffered
the counterblow of homelessness
she is your mother, your sister,
your daughter

invite her home
invite her to a party
when she's blue
and lost in memory
wrapped around a bench
like a woman
grasping for a former lover

the faces change — painted
unpainted but the weighed
down undiscovered women
of Gauguin's dreams come and go
up and down Market Street fog
like the historic green
and orange F street cars
only the street cars are not lost

BLOOD

by George Wynn

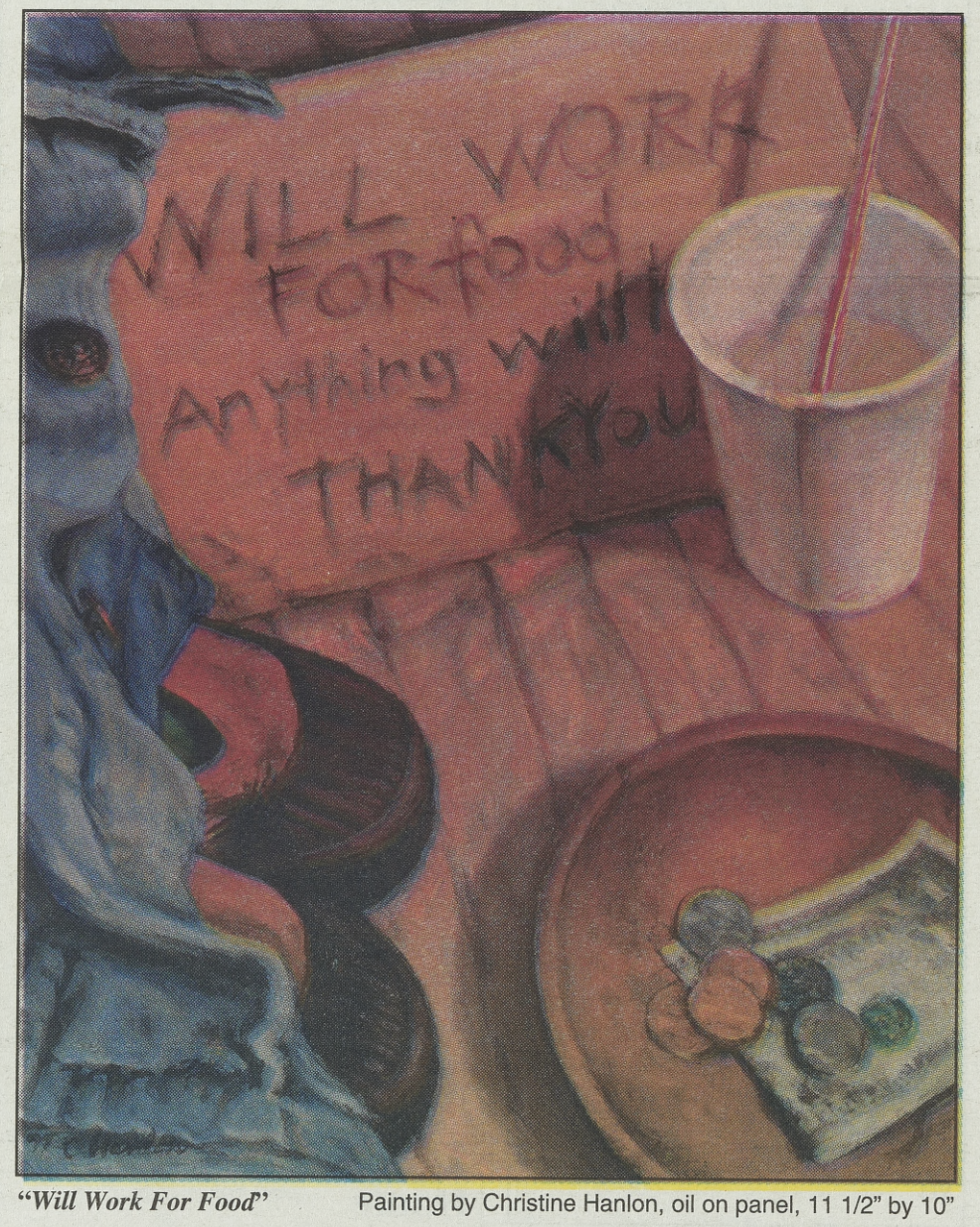
who handcuffed justice
and dragged her out the door
she was doling out soup
for the poor
in Martin Luther King's dream
until the Huns beat
on Rodney King's head

the Huns blasted nuns in El Salvador
anything goes in paramilitary land
even little old ladies

back in the homeland the Huns
bust heads in Inglewood
even the deaf

even Emma Lazarus' immigrants
ain't safe
streets of New York are tranquil
who weeps for 40-bullet-riddled
innocent African body laying
in pool of blood
bulls-eyed by the Huns
for what?

whoever protests will earn their coffin
life ain't fair
in the time of the Huns



"Will Work For Food" Painting by Christine Hanlon, oil on panel, 11 1/2" by 10"

Why?

by George Wynn

above Market street
army and navy
pioneer store
the stars and stripes flies
atop the aquariumesque
glass edifice

directly across fountain jets
douse the U.N. Plaza
cement mess
but like a river
of sinking water
the humbled are
often shut off
like the splendid afternoon's
tucked-in bundled sleepers
who doze an hour or two
on McAllister Street grass —
an endless 24-hour day
without the luxury for whys

san francisco, new year

by George Wynn

when I reminisce
about my world
I write it down

who swallowed up peace?
what happened to love everybody?
what happened to new age?
anger's in the air

wanderer journal entry number one

a page of rage

hobbled men piss between dumpsters
grizzled men piss on every corner
restless men in blue—clean shaven—
stampede homeless folk through T.L.
alleyways to Market St. encampments
without pity
tinged with blood
chess players keep playing
advance their pawns
commuters' swift glances
at their chessboards
rushing home to mow their lawns.

Stanyan Street Blues

by George Wynn

green-fatigued hard-boiled men
clumsily wrestle with themselves
joke about rolls-royces
they left their swagger in the army
they hear voices
oh my God, you've changed,
scream their women
they left their wives
and moved into the Y
they left the Y
and moved into oblivion
sleeping in the park
behind Kezar Pavilion

Wish

by George Wynn

they are the leper people
they have no disease
they have no home
they have no gold dome
they do beg
they do freeze
they do not live
a life of ease

can you help
them mister
and missus
san franciscan
— please

Peter Marin

You can see over each sleeper
the invisible messengers bend

Messengers

by Peter Marin

You can see over each sleeper
the invisible messengers bend,
their sad faces bearded,
their eyes red-rimmed,
their wings near-solid
with a white coat of ice.
There, near the benches!
There, in the doorway!
There, where half-nude
a man lies near a sign-post,
his flesh turning blue.
What do they whisper?
Perhaps it's a lullaby from childhood.
Perhaps it's a dirge.
Or perhaps they whisper a name
the way father or mother
before all was lost
taught us to know who we were.
Stephen, *Molly*, *Lisa*, *Gene* —
see how clouds form
when the messengers speak,
see the sparkle of tears in their eyes,
see the mournful passes of hands
gently above, not touching, each face
as if they were casting a spell,
as if they were making a sign:
pass this one over, furies
or *this one is meant for heaven*
or *let this one return, again*.
Look! They are rising now —
first shadows, then clouds, then stars,
crystal clear in the glorious forms
of what, fully seen, we all are.

The Jungle

by Peter Marin

Midnight bought the farm,
Stone Eddie cashed in,
Red Sunshine is down —
the word comes out along the
grapevine like drums in the jungle
or a card carried on a silver dish.
Each time you hear it
a tree crashes down —
God's hand laying low
every man I ever knew.
Whole towns have dried up
with men the wild beasts
pressed to barbed wire
thirsty and spent —
a cheap hotel torn down,
a lunchroom boarded up,
an old pawn-shop closed.
What's left for us, the zoo?
Forty years on the road
you get an elephant's hide,
but when last week I saw
that down by the river
they'd paved the jungle over
I knelt on the bank and I cried.

SERENADE

by Peter Marin

No theory! Only the act of
compassion repeated again and again
brings God into the world.
Here he is, his hand out,
or badly playing a battered clarinet,
bucket beside him on the street.
Hey bud, ya gotta buck?
It's a ticket to the boneyard.
It's the price of living in America.
It's the last chance you have
to make it in the back door
of heaven. Hey, take it, bro!
And the song he is playing,
I'm Gonna Buy a Paper Doll,
drifts over the empty streets.



The paintings of Lenny Silverberg confront us with the humanity of homeless people cast out of mainstream society.

The Coats

by Peter Marin

Let each man with two coats
explain to the mirror
why God should not punish him
while others have none —
freezing now, and snow falling,
and those without coats
huddled on city corners
or crumpled in doorways
or standing, hands out,
at. the concert-hall door.
Didn't they fight your wars?
Didn't they pave your roads?
Didn't they tend you gently
when injured at the hospital
you ached for human touch?
Night after night, they die.
Night after terrible night
they sigh themselves away
in dumpsters, in burnt buildings,
in the back seats of junked cars
on the far edge of your cities.
They crowd your bedrooms in the dark,
they huddle under your silk sheets,
unseen, they bend over each sleeper
and touch with bloodied palms
this face, that breast,
given the task by a god
who wants no one to forget.
When, at night, you examine yourself,
there they are, in the mirror,
their pale faces the sky,
their tears the shimmering stars,
their trembling arms extended —
ah, you know whose arms those are!

The Shelter

by Peter Marin

Women and kids to one side,
men to the other, intake workers
weeding out the drunks and bums —
makes you think of the camps.
You been here before?
You promise to work?
Can you prove who you are?
It's like crossing a border,
it's like entering heaven,
as the keepers of the gate,
with blank implacable eyes,
decide who lives, who dies.

THE CROSSING

by Peter Marin

You and me, bro,
on a long train to nowhere,
a slow string of empties
crossing the desert,
swinging our feet
from the side of a boxcar,
close to nothing but the earth…
Hey! This is what we dreamed,
this is the magical escape
we imagined at twilight
watching the couples, Sunday-bested,
walking the bleak avenues
at the far edge of town.
There's a haze, distant mountains
and the faraway road
where cars small as flies
scurry on pointless journeys.
It's quiet, as if in a dream.
And a softness descends on the land;
the sky is the hand of a woman;
something is faint in the soul
as if in the presence of love.
Hush. I'll sing you a lullaby,
I'll call up childhood words
and the soft sound of voices
and the windows we gazed out of
watching the trains pass by
into the world of silence. Always,
even in mind, there's a beyond
promising us a strangeness
where at last we're at home.
Always a whispering comes
in a trembling of leaves
bespeaking the beckoning presence
of what we believe should exist.
Do you think, by some chance,
it's ahead? Have you ever,
my friend, seen it close?
This sun, this unhesitating light,
this sea-bed, empty of sense —
are we not, now, making a crossing?
Is there not, waiting, another life?
Will we not be given new names?
Watch: the passing-by of the world
is merely a kind of presentiment;
we too will rule vast kingdoms,
we too will don feathers and gold,
we too will sit silent at dusk
looking out over our countries
delighted by wisdom and wine.
Bet on it, bro. It's coming.

STREET SCENE

by Peter Marin

In the street
men without homes
beg for their suppers, their signs
held aloft: work for food.
Some are one-legged,
others have stumps for arms,
many talk to themselves, abandoned.
Naked, arms extended, a long-haired
Jesus-bird balances on one foot,
arms flung out, crucified on the sky.
In doorways the dead lie, rotting.
There's a smell in the air,
a smell of decay, of excrement, of
bodies unwashed by anyone save God.
And there's a weeping now —
you can hear it at dusk
down by the river
where the drum-fires burn
like stars fallen from heaven.
This is your country, this is mine,
when the age darkens with evil
and the sad wheel of seasons
grinds the flesh of the many
for the profit of the few.
Look: Reporters move among them
and hold out microphones
and ask for a few closing words.
One man, toothless, patch over one eye,
brings the mike so close to his mouth
you think he's going to eat it.
I wanna say hi to my mom
and give thanks to the folks
who've helped me make it here.
This day was a long time comin'
and it makes me fuckin' proud
to be standin' here today.
And in his hand he waves
a statuette made of air
and whistles a tune for the crowd:
Hey, I'm A Yankee Doodle-Dandy.
They clap. Then rain comes down.
Now there's no one in the street
but an old woman as fat as the moon
and a man with two grenades
hung from his red suspenders.
You get the picture, bro?
Is this a great country or what?

Husayn Sayfuddiyn

I would like to say goodbye to you
But sorry — we're too late.
Sorry you had to lie
Then die beneath the frigid sky

WITHOUT A FRIEND

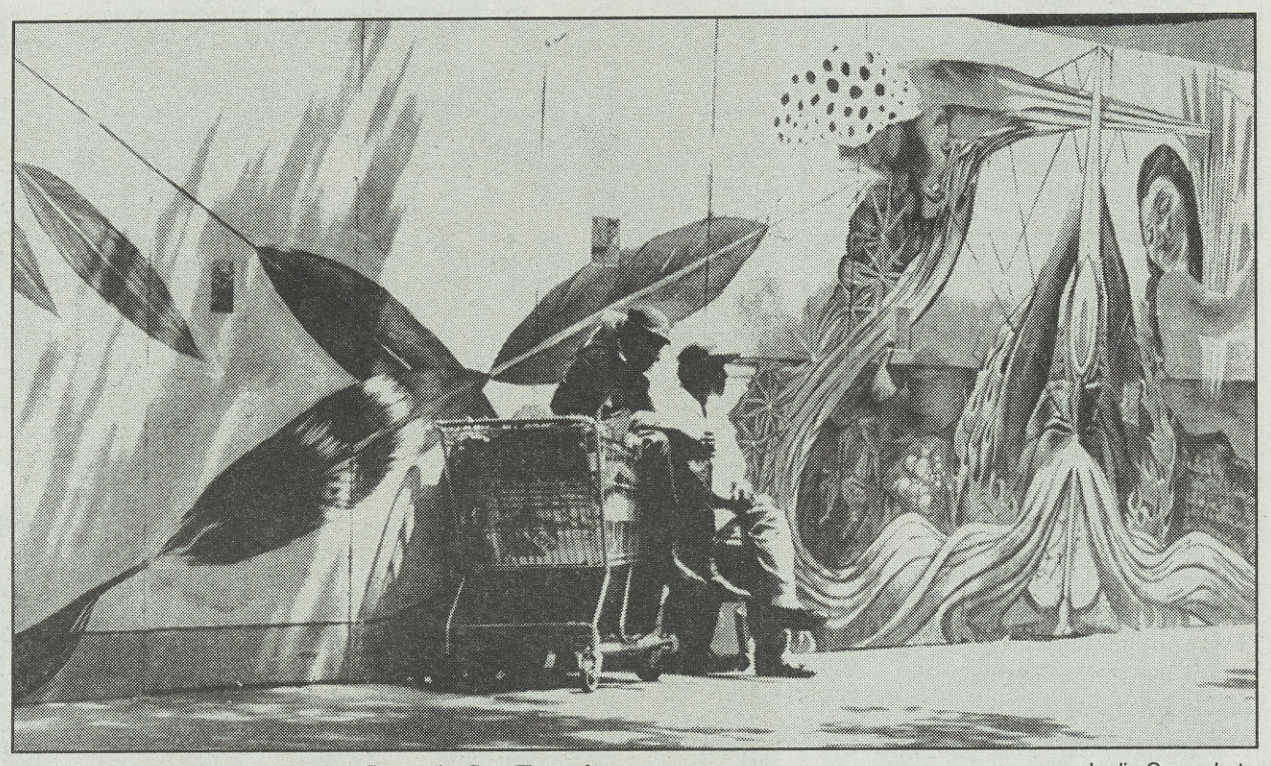
by Husayn Sayfuddiyn

This poem is dedicated to the homeless
But particularly to the Brother who
Recently froze to death
Under the freeway — I didn't know him
Not even his name
Hence to John Doe…
This is a story of a man without a friend
Going through life full of curiosity
Challenging the icons of what *has to be*
Then gone in an instant
With no formalities — Gone
Without farewells, without goodbyes
With no one knowing or caring
whether he lived or died
So no one could laugh — but then no one cried
Without a friend — like he came in
He didn't ascribe to a nationality
Cuz his nationhood defied reality
Wealth and its magic so near — and yet so far
far beyond the Mission's door
Without a friend or countrymen
like he came in
alone — and barehanded
To the forces that decreed his fate
To lie beneath the frigid sky
For the *Coroner's Official*
We're Too Late
I would like to say goodbye to you
But sorry — We're too late.
Sorry you had to lie
Then die beneath the frigid sky
Asking yourself
Why?
Why?
Why?
My sorry's too late
Your Potter's Field awaits
Without a friend

Beyond The Desolation

by Husayn Sayfuddiyn

Beyond the skyscrapers, asphalt and concrete
I saw the natural earth aglow with life
Through the desolation,
I saw The Garden
Everywhere
Beyond the desolate parking lots and through
The smoggy skies where under we kill and then
In afterthought, cry
For the Garden
Not knowing the Garden — is everywhere
Can't you see it?
All around you
And in you
The towering trees and snow capped mountains
prairies stretched like the expanding Universe
and yet, not an atom's width of its breadth
Its fruits are within easy reach and yet,
not sharing is what we teach
Hoarding—to deprive one another of shelter and life
Reducing it to debits and credits —
desolation's common law wife
Called Commerce
Bought and sold on a rigged auction block
Commercializing their humanity for
A golden watch to clock
Or being clowned for a hit from a $20 rock
All the while you beguile yourself into believing
You're getting a piece of the Rock
That you're climbing while you're standing
In the Garden
Can't you see it? The Garden?
Beyond the desolation
Staring at you, in the mirror?
And everywhere and in everyone?
The only problem is,
You need to close your eyes
They have you hypnotized..



Two homeless men on Market Street in San Francisco. Lydia Gans photo

THE DIVIDING LINES

by Husayn Sayfuddiyn

When I was young there were no lines, except the lines at the movie,
the store, or people waiting to enter the door…
It's not those kind of lines I mean, the kind that makes you want to scream… like sign
on the dotted line… sign your life away to slave everyday for some meager pay…
The invisible line… between affluence and poverty… between what you are and want to be…
The difference between beans and rice, and roasted pheasant… between the landlord and the peasant…
pleasure and unpleasant… Lost in a labyrinth of pain… dishonor and debt…
need all the help you can get… In Line at the Welfare, Medicare or just don't care…
Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, Asians, Jews… segregated by culture, by law, fearful news, Talmudic rules…
It's a line that determines who gets stopped at the street light… who gets arrested if there's a fight…
who gets shot in the back, who lives in a shack, who buys and sells crack… who gets time when they
commit a crime… who gets jobs and who gets robbed… who lives, who dies, who laughs and who cries…
White folk don't know! Do they kick in your door on the word of a "Whore?" Tap your phone?
Put your kids in a grave? Especially those they consider brave?
The line you cross when you lose your humanity… The line between reality and insanity…
ask how can it be… Black people are left out of this economy?
So there must come a day when you will make… a line of your own that you can't break…
then you will loom before your fellow man as a seeker of a new Promised Land…
But don't look for Moses… and if he came… he won't come with Roses…
or come to the Ramada Inn, 'Round Midnight tippin' in…
nor come to the Ghetto to lead a "batter ram"…
he'll be wanting to see old Uncle Sam… kickin' down the White House door…
Demanding, "Let my people go!"
Lines… the Mason-Dixon Line… hot line… sex line… never on time or in time with what is good…
Gangs of Hoods lined up to kill are soon taken out… their own blood spilled… Now or Laters…
the pageant girl, near naked in line, wantin' you to rate her… a dime a dozen… between was and wasn't…
Lines… of cocaine… windowpane… the mentally insane... Lines… in the morning, for wine…
powdered eggs… and toast from old bread… lines where you never move ahead… lines…
Between False and True, the Good and the Bad… lines between what you got and should have had
it's always coming up short… the lines between who got away and who got caught… between Beauty and
the Beast… the dead and near-deceased… thin lines… Bread lines… head lines, dead lines…
lines around the corner to see a view… the lines between what you do and wanna do… what you know
and shoulda knew if you could have read between the lines… between where you went and wanna go…
between what you would spend if you had the dough… what you see and wanna see… What you are and
what you could be... lines. … Help lines... on-line… Bee lines, crooked lines… making a straight line…
off line… to the Soup Line… the End of the Line… lines, all the time lines…
But don't look for Moses… and if he came… he won't come with Roses…
You won't see him on CNN… waiting in Line for the camera men....

THE LANDLESS PEOPLE

by Husayn Sayfuddiyn

They pay to drink water
to sit privately in a chair
to feed their children
even to defecate, or comb their hair
or they must walk along the careless street
a walk that leads *nowhere*…

They pay to sleep warmly
with a roof over their heads
they pay for heat,
for blankets and sheets for impassive beds
in rooms that are otherwise bare
where mice and roaches lair…

They pay with their blood spilt
onto sidewalks, gutters and drains
to blacken in the sun until dissolved by the rain
they pay to lurk around like shadows,
to stay out of others' way,
to serve as cannon fodder,
to be careful of what they say… they pay…

with their bodies, they pay with their souls,
they pay with their pride,
til they're exhausted or too old
Some dream and in their dreaming,
they see another sun
which shines upon a world of plenty,
while others pick up a gun…

In the gun they see power, to live or die as Men
just to die along the bloodsoaked streets
where their lives and deaths begin
the junction of virtue and sin…

they paid the price of living
in a poor man's landless domain,
where the reward of living
is a dark sky with beating rain;
tattered souls and tattered clothes
repelling hearts that beat a rhythm
of dissonant melodies, that beats in time
to an angry mind and a torrid symphony

the landless people must pay… they pay to live
and pay to die… pay to pee… even pay to cry…
secluded in some lonely room;
to emerge from the gloom with a mask of doom;

hoping to survive the system's knavery…

as pawns in its *Ultimate Slavery*…

Nancy Warder

does He who marks
each sparrow's fall
see me struggling here at all?

Jane's Homeless Blues

by Nancy Warder

nowhere to lay my head
sometimes I wish I was dead
got the homeless blues

out in the rain
my heart numb with pain

empty life
filled with strife

nowhere to lay my head

hungry and cold
I'm sick and old

does He who marks each sparrow's fall
see me struggling here at all?

nowhere to lay my head
sometimes I wish I was dead

homeless blues

JENNIE'S DREAM

by Nancy Warder

the shelter is full
huddled cold in a dirty doorway
I dream I'm sitting by a warm fire
sipping a cup of coffee
a purring cat on my lap

a harsh voice wakes me
"You can't sleep here! Move on!"

I want to go back to my dream
was that really me?
I don't remember my name
or how I got here

I used to know a prayer
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

REALITY CHECK

by Nancy Warder

yesterday
she wore a rainbow colored high hat
like Dr. Seuss' cat
she was talking to an invisible friend
smiling and laughing
she offered to tell my fortune
had she told her own?

today
she is back in our world
sitting on the cold dirty sidewalk
begging for change
she is not smiling
her phantom friends
are not answering the phone

is our reality such a gift to her?

I wonder

Collateral Damage

by Nancy Warder

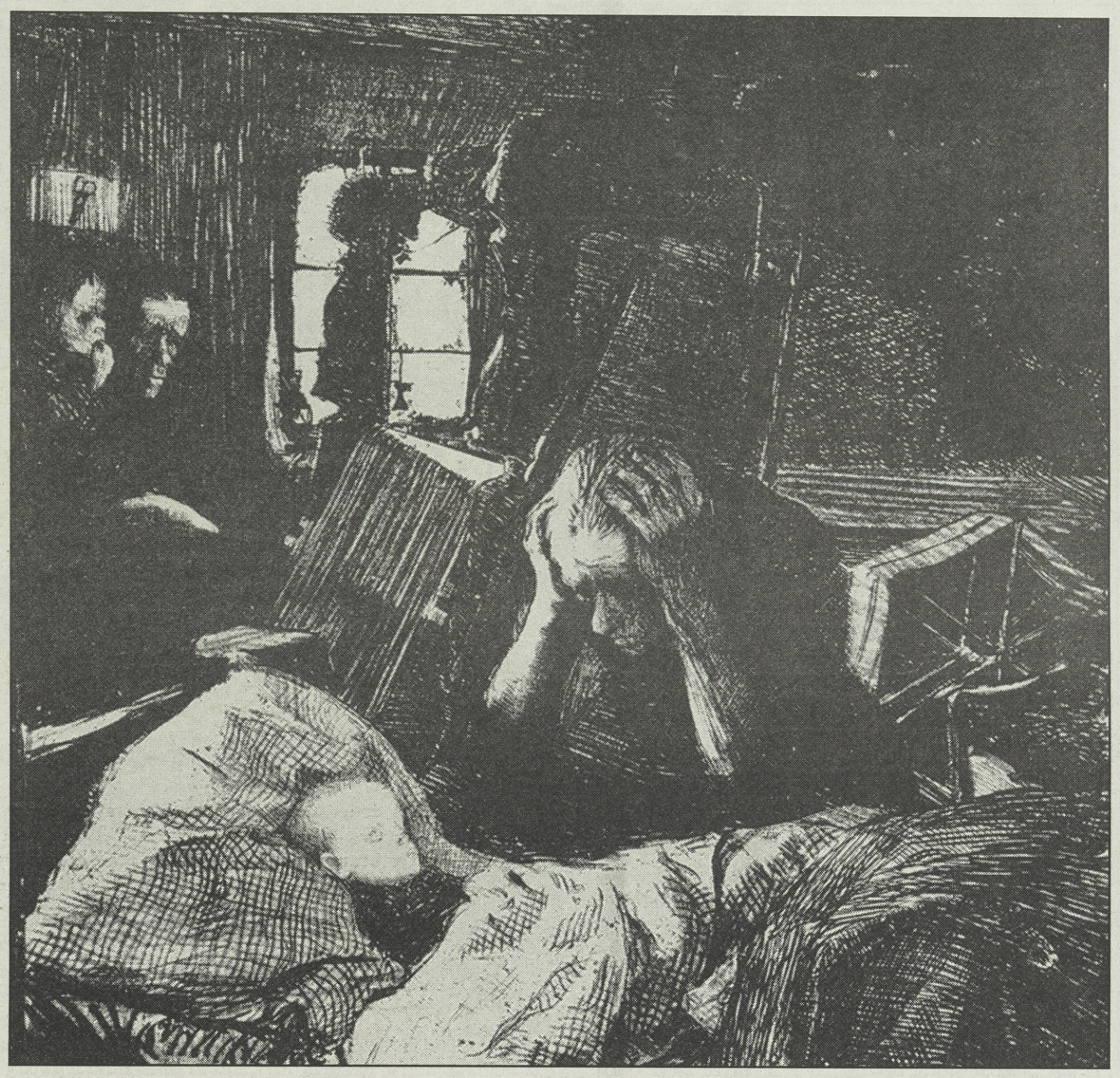
in a faraway land people are dying
no food reaches across closed borders
not-so-smart bombs hit a hospital
once
twice

while the rich fatten like toads
from huge tax breaks
thousands suffer and die
on the cold rainy streets
one of them an 86-year-old woman
nobody knew her name

postal workers die of anthrax
Congress, of course, is vaccinated

flags fly everywhere
red, white, and blue Christmas trees

I love my country
but I fear my government



"POVERTY" Art by Kaethe Kollwitz Lithograph 1897

Telegraph Avenue Urban Renewal

by Nancy Warder

around noon on a Monday
the Avenue is empty
no scruffy street kids
with strangely colored hair
huddled together
holding onto puppies
for warmth and love

the big green cleaning machine
makes its way down the sidewalk
no homeless youngsters
getting in its way

business men chortle
over the great Christmas season
no unpleasant reminders that for
many there is no room at the inn

I miss the kids
where did they go?
to some other street
where merchants wish
they would go away?

Where Do They Go When It Rains?

by Nancy Warder

the shopping carts are missing
from streaming streets
no one tries to sleep
huddled in wet doorways

what happened to the people of
the streets?
no roofs over their heads
no room at the shelters
are they trying to keep dry
under freeways?
are they riding buses all night?
maybe they flew South like birds
but they have no wings

where do they go when it rains?

TREEOCIDE

by Nancy Warder

now
they are executing trees

a shady spot
where workers ate their lunch
now bare and forlorn
only dirty cement left

what crimes could old trees commit?
block the sidewalk?
get in the way of progress?
homeless people were taking shelter
under their spread limbs

the trees must go
chop them down now

no one can sit under them
in sun or rain
just barren cement
where no birds sing
now

Trees were cut down at Hallidie Plaza in San Francisco because merchants complained homeless people were "congregating" under them.

Protective Custody

(U.N. Plaza)

by Nancy Warder

they built a fence around the grass
so nobody could sit there
or, heaven forbid,
sleep there
when people complained
they said
they were saving open space
for the public
by fencing it in

Didn't I hear something like this
before?
Didn't we burn down some
villages in order to save them?

Out of the Mouths of Babes

by Nancy Warder

they are tearing down houses in the Presidio
perfectly good houses people could live in
but they are the wrong kind of people
not the kind of people
we want in this lovely park
better to have more open space
perhaps we could move the houses
somewhere out of sight
they are tearing down houses
but people are sleeping in the streets
real people
who have no roofs over their heads
people who are tired and dirty and despairing
they are wrecking good houses
for fear the wrong sort of people
might move in
with all of their kids

when I try to explain why this is happening
to a child I know
he looks at me in amazement and says
"But that's just plain mean!"

Yes!

OAKLAND 2002

by Nancy Warder

midnight and the air is loud with sirens
body lies crumpled on the dirty cement
another senseless death in the endless turf wars
where jobless young men fight over
sidewalks they do not own one inch of
peddle poison to their brothers
and throw their lives away like scrap paper

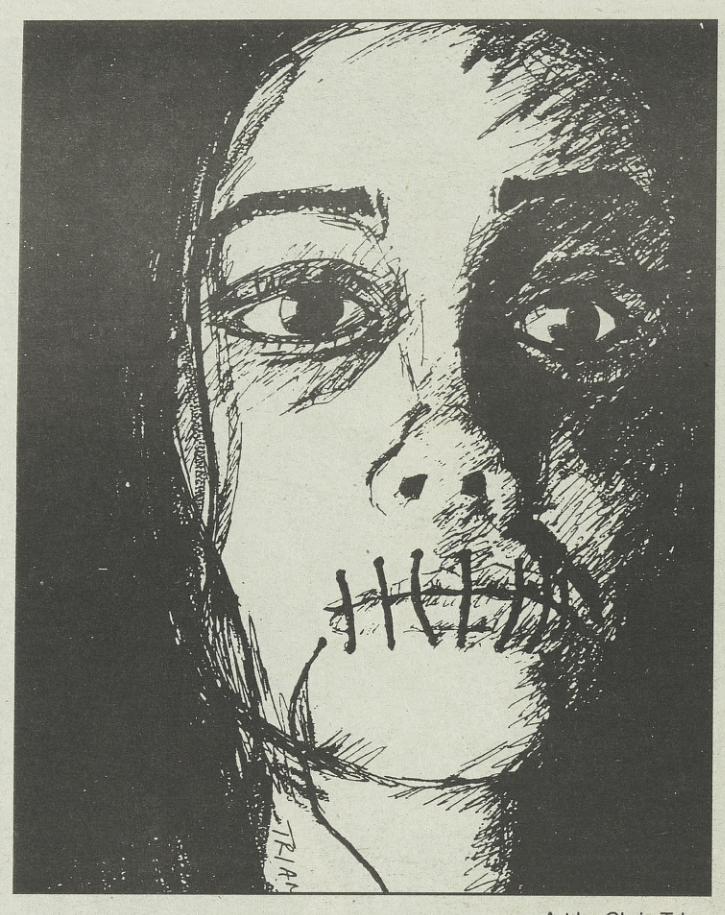
committees wrangle over causes
not so hard to find
when hope is lost
life has little meaning

daily the list of dead grows longer
while the lost young search
in all the wrong places for pride and honor

and mothers cry forever

Chris Trian

God Bless America and the
death of the human soul.
Our parents push history
through the streets
in shopping carts of woe.



Art by Chris Trian



Art by Chris Trian

Pluck Out Your Eyes

by Chris Trian

I am sorry for my part
in the death of the soul.
I am sorry for my part
in the global police state.
I am sorry for my part
in the escalation of hate;
of racism and polarization
and stratification and violence
against reason.
I was hard and cold
I needed defense.
The morning had turned predator.
People were climbing in my windows
with razor blades in their mouths.
There was blood
coming out of the walls.
My friends were going mad.
And everyone not going mad was
committing treason against the soul.
I was hard like a block of concrete
I smash with my hammer.
I can't go mad. I can't stay sane.
This is not a poem.
This is an indictment.
There is no escape for me.
Christ is an idol of glass.
Hitler spoke to me yesterday.
He held up an hour glass.
He held up a scales.
He was covered with scales.
He pulled back the curtains and
I saw four talons coming down
like prison bars out of the sky.
I fell down and cried
into the abyss
and the abyss cried out too.
A tidal wave of tears swept over me.
Now I'm a naked crab
washed up on a beach of regret.
I have consumed my shell
to shield my heart;
to shield my voice.
I indict my voice and my heart.
I have been a man
in the 21st Century.
This is my crime.
We are all guilty of bad timing.
I sentence myself
to a life sentence of compassion.
I sentence myself to my own voice.
I will not have my thoughts
dictated by the state.
I resign myself
to a prison called humanity.
I am indicted by my reason.
I renounce religion.
I renounce politics,
theory and theology.
The only currency we have left
is simple tolerance.
We are all bankrupt.
We all need currency bad.
We are all homeless.
We are all in the streets.
I will not be cold.
I will not be hard.
I will not be blind.
I have given my eye
So have many others.
The pile of eyes is growing.
It will be a pyramid,
a beacon in the coming darkness.
Eyes of humanity
piled up and crying.
Piled up and seeing.
A billion naked eye sockets
filled with defiance.
Pluck out your eyes.
Pluck out your eyes.
It's the only hope we've got.

God Bless America *(excerpt)*

by Christopher Trian

God Bless America
and the death of the human soul.
Our parents push history through the streets
in shopping carts of woe.
The dead and dying pile up
against the windows of the shopping mall.
They are washed away by the rising sun
like snow drifts of compassion.
The organ banks are full.
Survival of the fittest is just survival of the richest.
God Bless The Future. A fond farewell to freedom.
Marx and Engels, God and angels.
The Red Sea turned black with oil.
God Bless The Fuhrer and The Fatherland.
Everybody's father is homeless and looking for work.
The Mega-Corporation octopus New World Order
turning the world into a giant plantation
run by reptiles from the lower fourth dimension.
God Bless Nationalism.
Deranged little men with strange genital formations.
Master races and rat races and horse races.
The space race and the race against time.
Let's hear it for FEAR ladies and gentlemen.
God Bless Progress and the dehumanization of man.
A slave state, just think another species.
Bring on the unusual suspects.

Solar Eclipse

by Chris Trian

Because the sun is homeless, a man with a
swastika on his arm walked into a day care center
and shot the little children.
Because the sun is homeless, a white man,
mad at the world, bought him some guns
and set out to Cal-i-for-ni-ay to kill him some Jews.
Because the sun is homeless, he didn't realize that
everyone is Jewish in the world today.
Lost, wandering, hunted like animals,
fighting for a homeland,
when there AREN'T any more "homelands."
We are all in exile from the source.
Because the sun is homeless, our ancestors
push shopping carts through the streets.
Compassion has been evicted.
We are all homeless in our beds tonight.
Small, greedy men with cardboard souls hold the
crucible of our survival like a tiny bird in a huge fist.
We don't need conspiracy theories.
Everything is a conspiracy against reason.
Because the sun is homeless, the stars are orphans
and we are all lost. Cursing, fumbling in the dark,
like drunks looking for their keys.
Rednecks of desolation, mad at the darkness,
shooting out the light,
because the sun is homeless.

Moby Death

by Christopher Trian

We are the people who still remain,
defined by what we've lost.
Homeless, mindless, soulless.
When we pass each other on the street
we no longer speak. We look down.
Our eyes have been evicted.
That one shaved her head.
She lost her sanity, poor love.
See her mumbling to herself.
She's been committed seven times.
Even the nuthouses don't want her.
Another lost his decency. He cut up D's paintings
and gave the pieces back to her in a brown paper bag.
Those two lost their apartment.
In their city they elected a black Democrat
as Mayor. But he lost his principles.
Of course, we've all lost our faith in the government.
God got only 133 votes in the last election,
with one third of the angels voting,
and the Devil failed to clinch a majority in hell.
We are the people who have lost, are lost.
We don't burn books any more, we just lose them.
Poems are written in the margins.
We lose our poems too. No one reads any more anyway.
High school graduates can't identify Mussolini.
We were free once. There were biker gangs
and sex orgies and drugs that really worked.
Or were there? Where did they go?
We still get together at parties, but something is gone.
What is it? We can't remember.
It's been Winter now for 300 days.
Have we lost the sun?
Where do the lost things go?
Do the space aliens take them?
Is there a land of milk and honey somewhere in the past,
where the minds and souls and hearts are taken?
Or is the past just an attic full of useless junk.
We've lost the past and according to today's paper
we will probably lose the future.
The statistics look bad.
I've lost so many friends,
death seems to be seeping in like rainwater.
Youth is gone and the young sound like ant people.
Their minds are thin as exoskeletons.
They sit in furnished apartments watching idiotic cartoons
with no books except a copy of *Mein Kampf*,
or maybe Ayn Rand, which they haven't even read.
They've lost the ability to read.
Who needs to with computers?
There aren't any more stars, just web sites.
Last night I saw a huge amputated junkie's arm
burning in the sky like the Hindenberg.
Children in black plastic and platforms
were leaping from it screaming.
Others rode on its back stabbing it
with syringes the size of harpoons.
Mob Death. Moby Loss.
Sometimes I get so sad it's like a symphony.
But I'm on medication and soon I'll lose my sadness.
We're all on something these days.
So life is relatively painless,
unless we lose our pills.

ROBERT STEVENS

The Machine kills the holy mad prophets, poets, artists, and heavenly winged dancers and singers of love in this place

Machine One

by Robert Stevens

The Machine finds
the cheapest possible use
of minimum space
and exploits it.

The Machine walks on the legs
of the weak,
and feeds on the fat
of the starving; The Machine is
fueled by the drugged corpses
of the destitute
that burn with a sputtering flame.

The Machine kills
the holy mad prophets, poets, artists,
and heavenly winged dancers
and singers of love in this place —
this Spanish-stuccoed Paradise,
and replaces them with suits
that are stuffed with logistics,
projections, budgets and
sweet-sounding euphemisms
for working human beings through
a slow, bland death.

Singing Proud To Be Alive

by Robert Stevens

A boulevard cannibal, madman
poet, and chivalrous drunk,
I guzzled my cheap short-dogs,
dreaming that I channeled Charles,
ignoring the angel of Balaam.

Gritty, ugly, and alone,
every skid row was a shallow grave,
and love slouched like a semicolon
in the deepest fragile shadows,
snickering like parched thin paper

The last drained bottle shattered
against the wall
of the quiet temple, I awoke
to the pulse of life
throbbing in old bare wounds.

The ascension from hell has begun,
a spiritual journey aborted
when I was 14 years old;
I resume
the tortuous trek
where the road forked
then.



"BEGGARS" Art by Kaethe Kollwitz Lithograph 1924

Street Survivor

by Robert Stevens

The boulevard cannibal is a madman
that burns from beginning to end as a
candle, ignoring the angel of Balaam,
and the Buzzard of Love
slouches on his shoulder
like a semicolon, as his passions glide
beneath the surface as effortlessly
as a dolphin that surfs the tides and
leaps over the wakes
of passing ships,
temporarily free from the confines of
mere mortal
existence.

Just Existing

by Robert Stevens

Birth, mirth,
And earth,
And upon his lips,
A venomous curse.
Born into poverty,
Raised like a soldier,
With adult responsibilities
Laid on his shoulders.
Alone in the world,
To face its perversions,
Cultivate vises,
And choose his diversions.
Age brought knowledge
And he lost his regard
For love or beauty
And his heart grew hard.

Robert Stevens is a homeless military veteran, poet and writer.

A Happy Nobody

by Robert Stevens

Ginsberg's dead — Burroughs,
Bukowski, Levertov — dead. All
the old poets and writers
are dropping quietly as
croissant flakes on white carpet.

"You're going to be a famous writer,
Bob," they tell me.

"No — I won't," I insist, "I will write,
relax, try to enjoy life, then I will die
in obscurity — a nobody. What's
more, when I die, famous or not,
my last words, my epitaph shall be:
'Sooner or Later, Even a Fool
Says Something
Profound.'"

Swing

by Robert Stevens

Dollar bills are braided
into nooses, and
we are all eager
and ready to steal,
cheat, lie, and kill
in order to possess
our own
coarse, looped length.

We stand, giddy
on the trap-doors,
smiling smug with the weight
of wealth, no matter
how small,
around our necks.

It is a death
without pardon, but
we are ready
to swing, baby
swing.

Mea Culpa Est

by Robert Stevens

I suppose I should apologize to you, America;
America the Big Corporate Flibbertigibbet
that grinds the humble masses
into a pate of taxes
to fuel your barbed steeds of war.

I guess I should say I'm sorry America;
America the sneering yuppatriots
rooted with an umbilical to a shrinking
American Dream; shoring up the trenches
of the Great Digital Divide so
diligently, so fervently.

I feel a twinge, because I don't care.

I've packed my bags, and my feet will fly me
to freedom, as the winged feet of Hermes, to
the freedom of our forefathers—America mine,
anonymous, homeless, unbound.

All Their Grief In Their Arms

by Robert Stevens

Street veterans, mercenaries
who patrol this civilized jungle,
unravel themselves one
stitch
at a
time,
like a grimy, worn-out old carpet
that has been walked on
for generations.

These avenue arabs
are the roll-your-own soldiers
who squint at deep mornings of
despair and hopelessness, their
faces and spirits hard-edged
pockmarked walls, etched with
a relentless humility which
the balm of wine and heroin
cannot heal.

They hide until tomorrow,
and until the finality of
enduring, concealing darkness —
two
yards
deep.

They Have To Take You In

by Robert Stevens

Plodding decisively, the prodigal
returns
to the administrations of his society,
his people,
the strong fortresses
he had so long disdained
in favor of freedom's
unforgiving wilderness.

They undress his feverish old wounds,
unwinding and uncovering
to reveal other, darker layers
stained
like a butcher's apron.

The last ragged bandage torn away,
the healers sigh and weep
over the raw core of pain, gently
lavishing the *elixir vitae*
for the ravaged soul:
Home.

The Hiding Place

by Robert Stevens

It is here, within my sanctum sanctorium,
that I can be invulnerable
beneath a laminated bastion
of mentality and reason,
I conceal me safely,
skulking these private halls
inside my skull.

I babble like a madman, cackling
at my cold wounds, pretending
that they are healing (so I don't require your
intrusion to soothe me, the scared me, the night-
mare
me, the whipped dog me, the retching and puking
me,
shivering in icy darkness) and I am unafraid,
so leave me alone.

I cry alone silently,
the inside of my cranium shrieking
like a psychic cyclone, howling
in agony for a gentle angel
to crumble my walls, subdue me, vanquish me,

Short Story

by Robert Stevens

There once was a wino
who almost died from his
alcoholism. He eventually
found help in the nick of
time, got off the streets, and
began the long process of
becoming a productive
member of society. He
followed the sacred advice of
his friends: Get a job, work
hard, pray, and never give
up hope, and your meager
life will get better. But his
life didn't improve. In fact,
he became quite ill, and he
fell into the abyss of crippling
depression. But before he
died, he got rip-roaring
drunk, because he knew,
somehow, it would end
this way, and he
laughed.

Lynda Cobden

Away in a manger,
away in a sleeping bag,
under the freeway



Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

Janie Moves On

by Lynda Cobden

Janie wake up, wake up, get out of bed.
We are only allowed to stay in the
shelter until 7 a.m.
Everyone has left the dormitory.
Don't burn your bridges.
We want to be eligible to return.
You know the terrors of the street
at night and how we must stand
guard for one another to stay
safe during the long night.
I know you're feverish but you have
your sleeping bag and we can go
under the freeway to rest.
Later I will get you some chicken
soup after we sell some recycled cans.
Nothing would be better than sleeping
Janie, but we must move on.
I know you're weary and your muscles
are weak but we must move on.

Cast in Humanity

by Lynda Cobden

Cast in metal, cast in bronze
no this is flesh and blood.
There is silence as she walks by.
She tries to stay in a group as night
falls to shield herself from
another layer of vulnerability.
Outside the opera house they see
patrons clad in Givenchy and
Oscar de la Renta designer clothing,
quite a contrast from previously owned
denim and corduroy.

Away in a manger, away in a
sleeping bag, under the freeway,
inside doorsteps, near on city streets

She saw a theater marquee,
the feature is *What a Beautiful Life*,
and she moved on into the
inky darkness of the night.

The Battle Replayed

by Lynda Cobden

Vietnam veteran is still fighting the war
trying to survive on the streets.
He seldom sleeps because he does not
want to live through the night sweats
and the technicolor battles
over and over in his mind.
Financially unchallenged relatives
have no time for him. They had the
wherewithal to attend college when
draft lottery numbers were called.
As citizens we have a lot of relatives.

Do You Feel My Pain

by Lynda Cobden

He said, "I feel your pain."
The fire of illness disintegrates.
The highwire safety net disappears.
Stomach rumbles in hollow hunger
low blood sugar, waiting in a line
a block long for a meal, feeling faint,
anchoring body with cane.
The clothes are so tired and threadbare.
Cough spasms are loud and hacking.
Throat is so scratchy and harshly painful.
Muscles ache in agony.
Shoe leather is so thin and full of holes.
Rain permeates from pore to pore.
Darkness is so enveloping.
The tunnel is long and winding.
Where is the light?
Spirit is in need of a lift.
Street Spirit light
and possibilities are vast.

Life's Toll

by Lynda Cobden

Arrow pierced wounded heart,
A chilly fog surrounded emotions
and encased them like a
snug fitting plastic wrap,
sealed off from life before the loss.
It was a barren iciness
with dark foreboding skies,
Encompassing feelings like
desolate winter.
There are trees without leaves, and
Stark frosty earth without flowers
And dank ground covered with snow.

Time froze in the face of death.
We are all so small and finite.
How the clock ticks rapidly.
Minutes ago he was fully alive, but
Now he enters the tunnel to eternity.
How an instant changes our lives.

Ruth's Mantra

by Lynda Cobden

Faith, hope, prayer and a shower,
are the thoughts at first light.
There is no one mold that fits all.
The downsizing train sped through
and Ruth did not see it coming.
Savings melted quickly.

Stomach rumbles, every pore feels
clogged, hair is getting matted to scalp.

Carry on, with faith, hope, prayer and a
shower. I will get to the housing lottery
early, and help the host by sweeping.
Faith, hope and prayer already renews
and lifts positive insights to mind.

Rumbling stomach will hopefully cease
at 8 a.m. when the doors to the
meal program site open and with
faith, hope and prayer and a shower
I will carry on with my friends.

Trudy Is A Teacher

by Lynda Cobden

Trudy, has such a sweet, gentle, kind smile while she
holds up her *Street Spirit* paper and offers it for
sale at the downtown Berkeley Bart.

Elaine was rushing home and thinking about
dinner preparations and other appointments
as she took the stairs down to the Bart train.
Trudy had a magnetic, charismatic smile and
Elaine found herself stopping and going back up the
stairs to buy the *Street Spirit* from the peaceful woman.

As Elaine trod down the stairs she thought of
Trudy working outdoors on a cold misty winter night
and how she had seen her there each night that week.

Elaine went back and bought a *Street Spirit*
and another for a friend. Trudy said she was
working to obtain $5.00 for a room that night.

Trudy presented Elaine a tall, majestic lily,
the first of the season on that early March evening.
Though it was Lent, the time of a spiritual desert,
Elena felt the spirit of pure Easter,
the spirit of joy as she received the gift from Trudy.

Elena and Trudy shared a hug. Elena was overwhelmed
that one who had so little gave so much. Can we be gifts?
Trudy had little but Trudy had so much because
She knows how to give.

Janet's Journey

by Lynda Cobden

There are tears. There are fears.
There are street smarts for a woman on the street.
She makes friends, forms coalitions, and they bond.
They find resources, learning to make do together.
Her face is weathered, and her sleep is fragmented.
She wants clean hair, fresh pores and scrubbed teeth,
and it's a challenge. They are walking and walking
and waiting in lines for food and shelter.
They encourage one another continually.
344 dollars a month does not last long.
From the duffle bag she pulls out her rosary and
artificial flowers. At the shelter, on the street, wherever
she goes, she knows God hears her just the same.
As she gazes at the flower she knows there is still
beauty in the world. There is perspective.
There is a mountain of hope to climb.
There will always be a home of faith in my heart
and no circumstances can change that.
Nothing can change that no matter where I am
there will always be a home of faith in my heart.

Marcy's Dream

by Lynda Cobden

She dreamed of freshly painted lilac walls with a matching lilac
bedspread and curtains. There would be a wonderful walnut
desk to sit down and do her homework.
At night they would all sit down at their
round dinner table and talk about their day.
She dreamed of a backyard with a willow tree
that grew each year with her and her brother.
She woke up and saw the naked light bulb and the holes in the
linoleum. She needed to use the communal bathroom down the
hall from the room and her brother stood guard at the door.
Her mother repeatedly said study and
we will work toward another life.
Marcy was thankful they had a home tonight.
Mother worked at a minimum wage job
but attended City College at night.
Some day she will have that lilac bedspread
and matching curtains and a walnut desk.
Each night no matter where they were
they huddled together and said their prayers.
Together they were building a new tomorrow.

Randolph's Experience

by Lynda Cobden

They said don't sleep on the street
but the shelter is full and the body
just can't walk another step.
It's icy cold with shrill winds
freezing down to the bone
blowing moisture-laden fog
into my face.
The night seems like a century
in this inky, freezing darkness
of watchful, tentative sleep.
There is merriment and giddy
laughter by the opera house
and all I want is a place
to lay my head
without someone saying,
you, go away, go away!
The cars in the parking lot
get more respect than me.

Joanna F. Bragen

are we to lock up
all the children
who aren't perfect?
when did youth
become a diagnosis?

SSI

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

do you think it is a joke
that I am disabled?
do you think I am lying?

who in their right mind
would choose
to live on a pittance
and live in fear
that it could be taken away
at the stroke of a pen

why don't we just
pull ourselves up
by our boot straps
is what you must think

I guess you need that money
we suck out of the system
to build another bomb

we already fight
our low self-esteem
we don't need your stigma
your supposed "hand out"

we know you want us to go away
we are a burden to society
if you could
you would kick us out

is this what America is all about?

Daniel

by Joanna F. Bragen

as I remember
everyone in junior high
is self-conscious
emotional confused

but a "psychiatrist"
got a hold of Daniel
said there was something
wrong with him
"he's depressed"

sent to even more doctors
those high and mighty ones
determined Daniel was
"mentally ill" really!
he was just growing up

before he knew it
he was shipped to Napa
spent 10 months
fighting daily to get out

are we to lock up
all the children
who aren't perfect?

when did youth
become a diagnosis?

frightening that someone
can take your childhood
and lock it away

I know Daniel now
smart caring enthusiastic
he has recovered
from the nightmare

but will he ever
get back
age 14?



Art by Joy DeStefano

Recovery

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

I believe
in happy endings

I believe
there is always a way

I believe the older I get
the more I know myself
the more I know my illness
the more I accept

I have hope

full recovery
may never be mine
and what does that mean
anyway?

I am lucky

I still get angry
and feel that things aren't fair
but I have miracles in my life
and I hope that I can share

recovery
does it make it
all worthwhile?
I will never know
but I have seen the power
of love
and I take that with me
wherever I go

MEASURING

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

How to measure
the loneliness

So deep
that I can't see the bottom

So long
that it looks like a horizon

Does it come from so far away
that it is past the stars
or was it a small seed
that was planted in me
at birth?

So hot that it burns
from inside my whole being

If I could locate it
measure it
would that tell me how to capture it
discard it once and for all?

Held Hostage

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

I have been
held hostage
right here
within the borders
of the USA

tied up
locked up
humiliated
ignored
put down
accosted

I am told these people
are "professionals"

I've seen my
human rights vanish
once the door
closed behind me

what is their reward
for such degradation?

will they stand trial
when our side has won?

not enough
to fight the disease within
I also must fight
to keep my freedom

Long Walks in the Rain

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

there is no cure
for my negative emotions

no cast
for despair

no medication
for anger

no operation
for self-depreciation

no bandage
for disappointment

there is no procedure
that will cause me
to forgive

just long walks in the rain
that clear my mind
and replenish my soul

Anger

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

anger
at my SSI worker
who decided to cut off
my SSI and MediCal this month
so I can't get my medication

anger
at the "counselor"
who lied about me
so I would be tied up

anger
at the board and care operator
who let her niece steal from me

anger
at the program director
who always told me
that I was "manipulative"

excuse me
but who made you GOD
so intent on making sure
you come out on top

what do I do with the anger?
the rage that builds up
until I feel out of control
and ready to explode
is it worth the fight to prove that
I am just as important as they are

anger
chips away
at my faith in humanity

burns hot
like oil
flooding through my body
fueling my passion
to set things straight

will my anger
make a difference
some day?

End of the Month

by Joanna Freeman Bragen

nobody probably knows
what it is like for us
at the end of the month

we live
for the 1st and the 3rd
so we can get
our government
pittance
just enough to make us
live
below the poverty line

we even paid into it
since the day we started working
but people still call it a handout

we live alright
for about 2 weeks
then things get rough

rent
bills
food
smokes
coffee
anything else

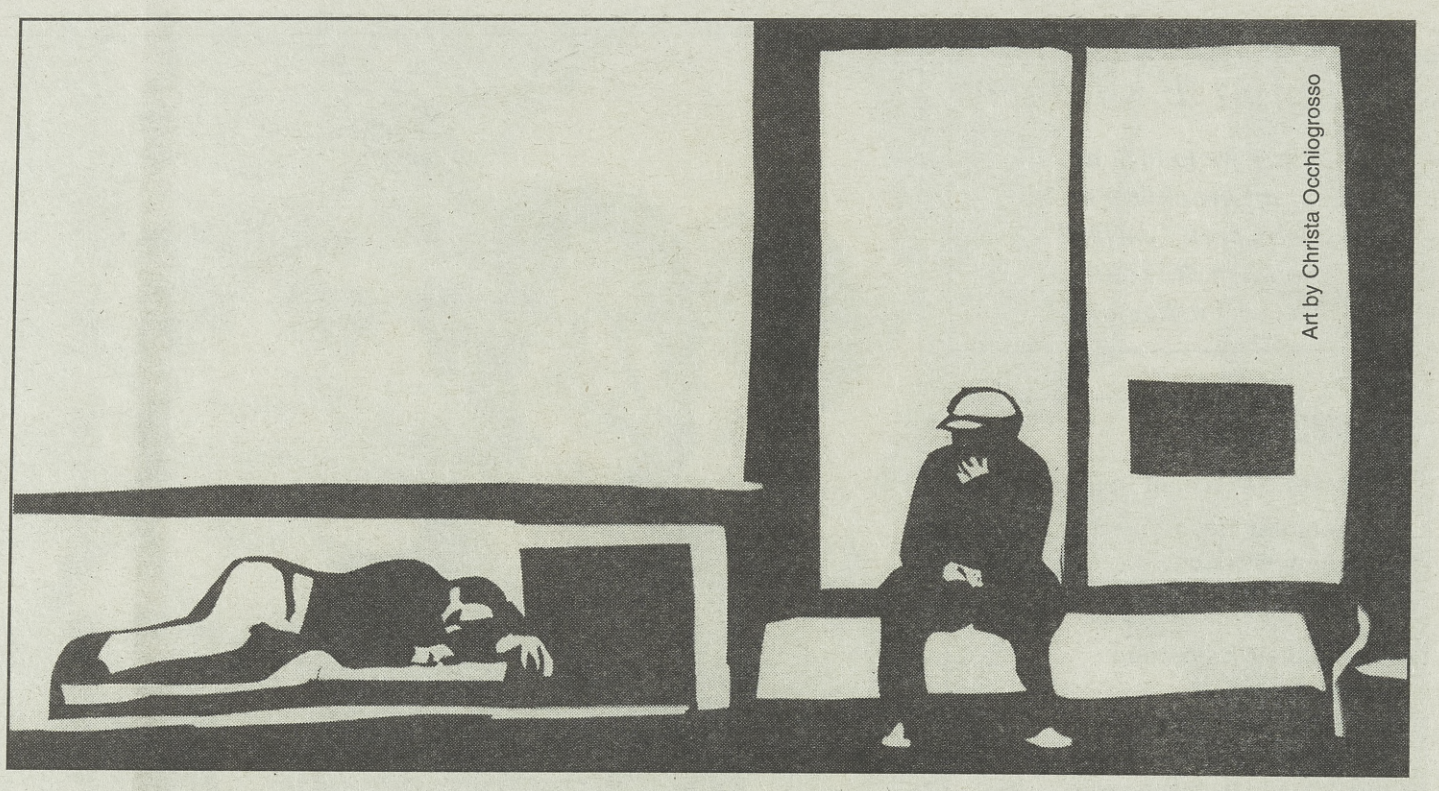
in that order

the later it gets
the more blood
we try to get
from a turnip

just so you all know
in case you were wondering
life is hard
at the end
of the month

RHETT STUART

while creative artists
paying own way
paving town rainbows
are forced out at expense of
greedy bullying
government grimaces



Town Downtown

by Rhett Stuart

Low moon looks just on Hayes Street,
lightens night unburdened

Shop front for bookie operating

Man softly selling shirts I wear off fence
says, "I live outside,"
unnaming self homeless,
"God takes good care of me"
Has job, self-starter, own business

Rain stops
"I'm more concerned with people storms
Just one phone call gets me outta here"

Says FBI hang out building there
"I know things others don't"
Writes my word picture here
Repeats "God takes good care of
Me!" drawing me a star

Tomorrow this time I'll shoe dark's
again newly tossed blanket,
show man by the fence
there are no strangers,
show him his poem by the moon,
poem by the moon off its moonlight,
poem authored moon off its
Hayes Valley light glow
leading night indoors

United States of Washington, D. C.

by Rhett Stuart

Separate wrong

Character of George Washington, a wash
While headlines boom booming economy
While small-print underbelly dares not
proclaim where it heads to
The rich belly making the poor poorer

But muscular 25-year-old who would
panhandle anyway, lives a paradox;
approaches slim 65-year-old on fixed
income to give him some

while creative artists
paying own way paving town rainbows
are forced out at expense of
greedy bullying government grimaces
for vote coveting their
costly power of no returns

Lit Countenance

by Rhett Stuart

Homeless haberdasher up block
loaned a van this night
Countenance reflects Christ pictures
while discourses about angels
Eyes penetrable purity, stronged,
when near imperceptible dewdrop
runs down cheek in the dim light
estranging him from his sons

tho dimness bears but
face of weakness and not weakness,

the firm thinness darting ray to boys
lyric I publish on this self-effacing
visage, presto must I embrace,
countenance limp beyond
abatement to dark
wave sliding in, shoring

as I abet against its onrush
Without backing down,
black saliva backs off and
back to sea, we, amid
familiar tumultuous mid-waters,
breathing-in hard wisdom
Breathing in its overhead grey grief
we propel, raft,
evolve quieted small vessel
languid in low key light of a Christ face

Perverse Preferences

by Rhett Stuart

Liked not having money.
When New York City natives
rude to me I liked that too.
Carrying no briefcase, wearing no tie,
unowned by car or credit card
are things I most liked,
keeping it simple, abstaining
that which would laud me
fortune's vast debt.

Thomas Was Born

by Rhett Stuart

Joey and Lindsay and Thomas and Gloria and Daniel and Eddie and Mel
Maimed in the inner city namelessness.
The nameless have stronger faces.
Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice no longer track downtown in the eighties
where some survive.
They never knew them —
Never knew Joey has AIDS. Medical people won't administer him
the new drug to slow it down until he's dying.
His mother hates him. "You're a better person than your mother."
"We're all going to die. What's important is how we spend our time here."
Lindsay has no feeling she exists.
I know why.
She was always told she didn't
While she masterfully and magnificently paints about it: about the nightmare.
Thomas was born with brain damage.
Copes an hour with me —
For the main part with some cheer to cheer between the reoccurring despair.
Gloria? Lured out of town and raped and
More I cannot stand to write.
Daniel is English and brilliant and young actor of some repute already and
Already going blind, his theater's afraid of being sued:
Ireland and the IRA rebellion. A visit to the right place at the wrong time.
Eddie arrives just out of jail with nothing to live for
Unless providence thinks to provide him teeth
to teeth his jazz sax again. I hope he made it.
Mel's a sweetly strong man of his soul.
Runs a Vietnam Vet group; prepares them protection for when
his demons get here,
Land the shores out from his screaming night sleep. Mel
Smiles strongly sweet when he awakens to soften the plight of
people while they like him.
You'd like Mel. I like them each. All except Lindsay.
She made me angry yesterday. Counsel the suicidal now and again and
Am not ready for ones when they're ready to kill themselves.
Sometimes can help a little or even a little more.
Am comfortable with them. They teach me.
The Tenderloin.
Not all is inept down here.
Bob and his brood uptown had not told me much.
But the Tenderloin is named inaptly.
It's harsh and hard and not tender — and nameless.

In Memory of Those Who Died on the Streets

from page one

The people who turned out for the Memorial Service and the sparsely attended vigils had some stories to tell behind the scenes. One person said that the amount of money Bill Gates lost in the recent stock market downturn could house every one of the estimated 10,000 homeless in Alameda County — and he'd still be the richest man in the country. People at corporate headquarters and his private estate on the lake did not return our calls.

One issue discussed was the federal poverty level, which is used to determine eligibility for certain federal programs in such a way that the same level applies in the rural South as it does here in one of the most expensive areas in the nation. No wonder Strom Thurmond is smiling. Federal pay policies also seem unfair. A mail carrier in rural Mississippi gets government benefits, including retirement, and their cost of living is a fraction of their fellow postal carriers in the Bay Area.

As I talked to old friends and strangers about the problem of homelessness, one simple answer repeated itself: Build more low-income housing. Sure, let us find the money. Educate people about existing programs. Do more job training. In Oakland especially, help people on parole find real work where they can be trained.

More cops? How about more gardeners? Oakland City Councilmember Nancy Nadel is only slightly ahead of her time. She had a wonderful idea. Rather than the Mayor of Oakland getting support for 100 more police officers, maybe what's needed is fewer officers and a really good training program for parolees in Oakland. She had vocal support, but not the votes.

The two most expensive settlements by the City of Oakland are for police brutality and falls on city sidewalks, based on Commission hearings. The parolees may not prevent police brutality, but they might be instrumental in learning how to prune those city-owned trees that cause so many expensive claims against the City of Oakland. It could just discourage them from doing another felony. It is so much cheaper to teach a person a skill than to incarcerate that person.

In Finland, a chief executive of Nokia, the cell-phone communications corporation, was fined for speeding. Finland has a wonderful policy. A person is fined according to his or her income. According to the BBC website, Annsi Vanjoki was caught riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle at 47 miles per hour in a 31 mph zone. Based on his year's income, his fine was $103,600. He is appealing. Finland has one of the lowest homeless rates in the world. With fines like that, or a tax system that makes corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share, so could we.

In all, the overwhelming sadness is that there is no realistic answer to solving the problem of homelessness. People lose their homes for so many different reasons. Drug and alcohol abuse cause suffering, even as funding for treatment programs is shrinking. People wind up incarcerated more often than in treatment.

Perhaps Finland is a bad comparison, because nuclear families and extended families are the norm there. It is a small nation; we individuals here in the Bay Area are more likely than not from somewhere else. Finland is also a homogeneous country; sadly, we let class, ethnic, gender and racial differences get in the way of pursuing common goals. As my grandmother, who came from another faraway land, would say, more's the pity.

Shirley Grant

You may not like the notion of
The people in motion but the people
will make a world they can own

Peace to the People

by Shirley Grant

Peace to the people, to the spirit within them
Peace to the people, I lay 'neath their wisdom
Fulfill their yearning, their glorious past
Ancient of days the first and the last

There's a strong wind a-blowing
And it's showing us something
It's showing us wisdom and making us free
You may not like the picture
You may not like the vision
But it's giving light to humanity

There's a strong mountain falling
And it's shouting out something
It's telling us we can win freedom once more
You may not like the message
You may not like the warning
But no one can win in a nuclear war

There's a strong rain a-falling
And it's shouting out something
And telling the people they can begin
You may not like the solution
Of this revolution
But we've got a world to make and to win

There's a strong idea coming
And it's reaching the people
Bosnia, South Africa, and here at home
You may not like the notion of
The people in motion but
The people will make a world they can own

The Dog Eat Dog Blues

by Shirley Grant

There's a man pawnin' his axe
Spent 20 years paying dues
Playing for nickels playing for dimes
He's got the dog eat dog blues

There's the soldier with his gun in hand
Thinkin' his side can never lose
Fightin' for things he don't own
He's got the dog eat dog blues

The dog eat dog blues is bound to do you in
If you're the dog that's doin' the doin'
Or the dog that's bein' done
The dog eat dog blues has got us
'neath its spell
It don't matter where you are,
you're still catchin' hell

There's the hustler in his long Cadillac
Keepin' his stable amused
He ain't nothin' but General Motors' whore
He's got the dog eat dog blues

There's the man in his business suit
Keepin' his wage slaves in use
Reapin' the profits of his greed
He's giving us all the dog eat dog blues

Nothing Happens by Chance

by Shirley Grant

I searched to find you in every corner
I looked to the top of my soul
My seeking took me to many sad hearts
But you were always the goal

When you ask and it is given
And your need is filled in a glance
Then you know that it's
All worth the living
Nothing happens by chance

I traveled through glasses of bourbon
Took captives and hostages too
Sank into pits dark and lonely
All on my way back to you

The power I had was a sham, Lord
No power could I command
Excuses were not in the answer
My will was not in your plan



"BREAD!" Art by Kaethe Kollwitz Lithograph 1924

A Brother

by Shirley Grant

He drank scotch in Berkeley
in the park
He gave a wino a cigarette, and
then he spoke to me in my despair
He gave a young man
his only good pair of shoes
He took a brother by the arm and
led him down Telegraph Avenue
And he drank my tears at midnight
And he talks gentle to my head

We had lunch in Oakland
and his gaze was soft
You can't measure his manhood,
it can't be measured
And he talks gentle to my head
in clear crisp light years
Shaking the dullness of time

Fight for Justice

by Shirley Grant

We are on this road together
Alone it's hard to find our Way
We can build a bridge of Peace, now
And make all our fences fall away

If you love Jesus, fight for Justice
This I know was Jesus' Way
Take back the Temple from the greedy
Work to build a better day

We can give each other shelter
Let our differences fall behind
We can make a new tomorrow
Heal our wounds and peace we'll find

Gather your hate and let it go, now
Treat our neighbors as our friends
Teach our children to be kind
Let each broken spirit mend

SLEEPING

by Shirley Grant

You don't have to close your eyes
to fall asleep
You may not be snoring
But you've blanked out
It's all around you
You hear it on the news at suppertime
It's there as you walk the city streets
People with no place to rest
no place to shower
no shelter from the rain
pushing shopping carts
carrying bundles
tired, hurt, lonely
while you drink lattes at Starbucks
and live in your carpeted homes
Merchants want to be rid of them
bad for business
Cops harass them
Tell them to move on
This is Amerika
See them if you dare get off your ass
and help make a space
Here in Amerika we have the
freedom to gorge ourselves
or the bad luck to starve
But sleeping is all we do

Not Hell — America

by Shirley Grant

The streets are paved
The sidewalks wide,
the shops are busy
And here we sit on the curb
With our belongings and our dog
"Do you have any spare change?
Maybe a quarter?!"
"Do you have a smoke?"
Hell isn't anywhere but in this city.
And yes, I smoke weed
The agony is covered and closed
And sometimes when I lay
down I can smell clean sheets
I roll up my jacket and put it under
My head and in the euphoric high
I think my jacket is a soft pillow
I drift off — and the Man comes
And nudges me back to reality
"You can't sleep here"
I've got the munchies
so I pull out a piece of bread
I got at the mission at noon.
But this is my Nightmare
My American Dream
Not Hell — America!

PLANETARY CITIZENS

by Shirley Grant

When I look at the moon
I see no boundaries
    No fences
    No flags
    No street signs designating areas
When I look at the earth
In pictures taken from space
I see no boundaries
    No border patrols
    No sign of ownership
    Of the land or the seas
        Or the mountains
        Or the lakes or the rivers
I feel like a planetary citizen
I feel like I could travel all over
This beautiful planet
Without seeing any armies
Pick my food from the trees
And as I go drink from the streams
Sleep out under the sky
Love when I felt the urge
Be nurtured by the sun
Be cradled by the moon
One planet
Under one sun
One air
One water
One
One
One

Men seem foolish to me
Fighting for things they cannot own
Fighting for territory
I am a citizen of something far bigger
Than my own greedy ideas
Men making armies to defend
Invisible lines, iron walls
Barbed wire gates
Tanks and guns
Nuclear stockpiles
    To annihilate each other if we
Step over the line
If we interfere with the
Amassing of wealth
I own nothing
Nothing is mine
This nation
This family
This air
This water
Even this body is not mine
This body which I cannot control
Or know where the pattern for it
Was created or made or developed
I do not consciously control one cell of it
I belong to something much bigger
Than I can conceive
I'm like a chair trying to understand
My creator
Some of us know we know nothing
And it's all right

Just like it should be
I belong to the planet
The planet does not belong to me
Even if I am a co-creator of sorts
I do not even know
Where my ideas are born
I hear the scream of a siren and
I wonder if the property of someone
    Is being vandalized
The property, the illusion that
Needs to be protected
Prisons and armies are there, to be sure
We are striving against ourselves
Stronger prisons
Stronger forces
    To help us protect ourselves
        Against ourselves
I feel sometimes that I should not only
Be the keeper of my brother
But the keeper of my enemy
Strange I should say that,
I have such a long way to go
For that to be a reality
I should be able to go to Iran or China
Or to Russia or Nigeria or Libya
Or East Germany or Nicaragua
Just as easily as I can go to Burbank
Or Oakland or Florida or Milwaukee
Some day
Sometime
Someone else may want this too

DENNIS OMOWALE CUTTEN

The sun — this sun, knows
there is work to be done: streets
to be cured, denizens to be healed

THE SUN

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

The day is confused, full of nagging anxiety.
Pale grey clouds make the atmosphere gloomy.
The denizens of the streets
carry despair on their faces;
rarely do they (righteously) smile.
There is an emptiness in their souls —
pain leaks through the vacancies.

The people suffer from lack of understanding.

Cats, dogs, pigeons, the sorry-looking rat, move,
dispiritedly, along the sidewalks, the gutters,
the alleys, sniffing, searching for scraps of food:
what remains of a sandwich, a chicken bone,
a watermelon rind, crumbs,
lifeless french fries, the bones of barbecued ribs.
Pork or beef? It doesn't matter.

The denizens lollygag on street corners;
they stand in doorways,
lean on light poles — rest against buildings.
The children are a bit listless —
playing uninspired tag.
When they aren't playing, they frequently beg:
"Got any change?"

The whores/hookers hook with undulating asses,
dress in revealing clothes;
pace up and down the streets.
As the men try desperately
to balance hard thoughts,
cops lay in the cut to collect the customary bribes.

The men, with little to do and nowhere to expand,
are bored and mad with themselves,
for the images are internalized, despised.
They implode: sling slicing invectives;
use weapons to hurt, to maim, to kill each other
at the slightest, dropping (real or imagined) insult.

The people feed on each other.
The sun is asleep and can't see the confusion,
the despair, the pain, the suffering.
But the sun soon moves and changes.
The sun — this sun,
knows there is work to be done:
streets to be cured:
denizens to be healed.
Then soothed with a thrilling,
a hip understanding.

The sun turns on its stomach,
yawns, O-P-E-N-S its eyes, stands up straight.
The hands of the sun shoot from the sky, piercing
through the clouds. And the day catches afire.

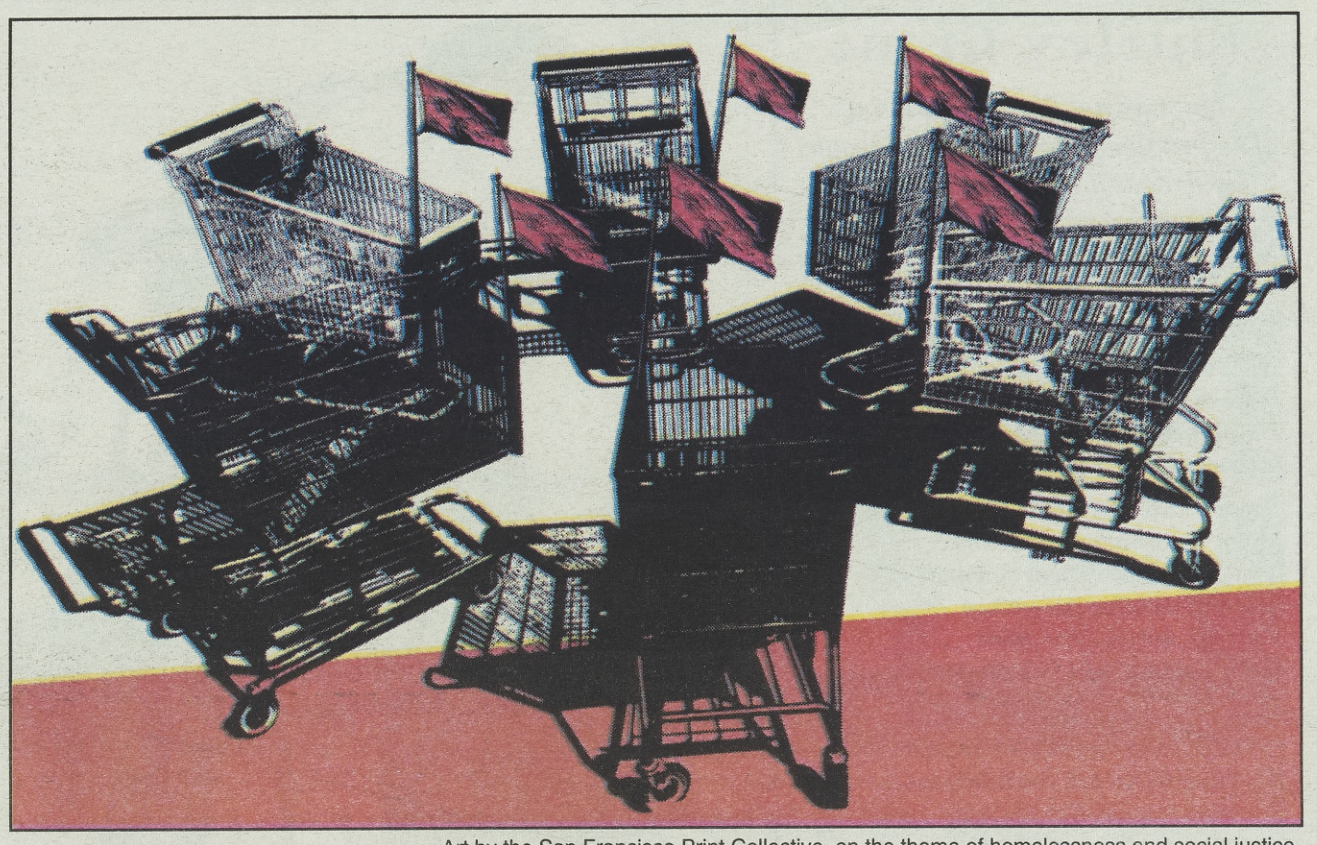
It is a giving sun, a healing sun, a considerate sun.
It doesn't cast stones, nor bemoan what has passed.
Magnificent. So magnanimous....
It beats with rhythmic force — cooking like jazz.

The movement is jazz.
A cultural metamorphosis — so hot and teeming,
the eyes of the streets can't avoid the exorcism.
The sun improvises too.
Like Hawk, Bird, Trane!
Lady Day and Abbey Lincoln,
Miles, Mingus, and Monk's "Well You Needn't"
There isn't a need for the hidden agenda.
No rhetoric to trip on
to confuse the trusting aspirations.
Just scorching heat, that timeless beat…
infused with the singular energy of love.

The sun keeps on shining and blazing.
I keep on shining and blazing.
It keeps cooking.
I keep cooking.
It keeps on beating,
and I keep on beating, cause —

I AM THE SUN.

Dennis Omowale Cutten was one of the finest poets published in *Street Spirit*, a gifted, lyrical voice of Oakland. He died on August 6, 1997, one year after undergoing surgery for a brain tumor. We celebrate his poetic art and his heart, vision and courage.



Art by the San Francisco Print Collective, on the theme of homelessness and social justice.

POETLINE

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

This is an emergency!
I've an emergency!
Are you there?!

I'm calling all poets…
all poets…
am calling all poets…
.... can you hear me?!

Damn! I thought I'd never
get an answer.
Now please listen:

We must unite.
Somehow, we've got
to make good more
appealing than evil.

3 Haikus

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

1. The military
keeps fattening itself while
the poor go hungry.

2. The corporations:
those bloodsuckers of the poor
who can't eat profits.

3. He be having scars
man, they deeper than malice
he mad at JUST-US

ZERO

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

i been astride the nite
comes morning and i'm still
hanging on… pushing against
a little piece of a much bigger madness:
it's absurd this living to profit

everythang fo' sale

DEMOCRACY

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

Another cardboard condo
on the sidewalk
securely tied to a cyclone fence.
Pundits promote shelters
for the homeless
but the homeless need homes,
not shelters.
And they need the warmth
of humane feeling.

We have allowed the pretentious elite
to rule our lives. The illusion of
individuality sharpens the knife;
the collective throat slashed into
bits of bleeding flesh. All the pain
widens the gaping wound(s).

Will the poor always have a
monopoly on misery?

Day and Night

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

Watching weary souls
The onslaught of poverty
Turns their eyes downward.

Earth

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

So blue, the sky weeps
Tears cannot save —
the ecosystem.

Black People

by Dennis Omowale Cutten

Your pain is mine
As you suffer I suffer
The salt of your tears taste bitter
When you stumble in confusion
I also stumble
Your wounds are my wounds
And when you're murdered
A part of me dies

When you smile I smile
Your joyous laughter
Rubs my soul

All the ONENESS our enemies
Try desperately to separate
Is the root of my existence

A Soul Shines On

for Dennis Omowale Cutten

by Terry Messman

A poet is going home, bound for the sun,
one last journey to the shining sunrise above.

You've closed your eyes, Dennis Omowale Cutten.
How do we see now?
How many times did he let us see with his eyes?
Borrowing his shining eyes, we could see
the unseen suffering on the street,
see invisible heartache made visible —
it's there, flickering in the eyes of a hungry child,
it's over there, in the last light extinguished
when an old man lays his head down
in the last alley, never to rise again.
The conscience needs eyes — blazing, visionary eyes.
He saw with the eyes of the shining sun.

And 30 long, deadly years past the summer of love
he proclaimed love like its last prophet,
returning in storm and sunshine to the
shining sacred message: love one another.

ee cummings said, "Buffalo Bill's defunct,"
then asked, "How do you like your
blueeyed boy, mr. death?"
Myself, I ask no questions of death.
I refuse to talk to thieves.
For Dennis Omowale's sake, I'd rather beat it to
death, beat it 'til it bleeds Resurrection.

What's needed is a sledgehammer —
a sledgehammer for suffering and sorrow.
Just the right sledgehammer
to break the death-grip of a poet's cancer,
to break open the domain of death
and take him back alive.
A sledgehammer to break the back of the blues!
A sledgehammer to liberate us from
the body of this death.

Wake up, angels, a poet's on the loose.
He'll set off the alarms all over heaven.
He'll ring the poet-line until he wakes the dead.
There better be justice up there, it's an emergency!
There better be love up there — right now!
Or make no mistake, Dennis will set off your sirens.
And you better make our poet feel at home:
Turn on all the lights!

And if there's any justice in heaven,
as there mostly isn't here on earth,
how about sledgehammering to bits
his pain? How about healing this wrong?
Give him all the mercy, all the shining, blazing
compassion he gave us on earth below.

Down here below,
I'm flying my eyes at half-mast these days,
and I can't see so well in this dimmed light.
But it's a different story up above.
A poet shines among the stars now.
Let the brightness begin!